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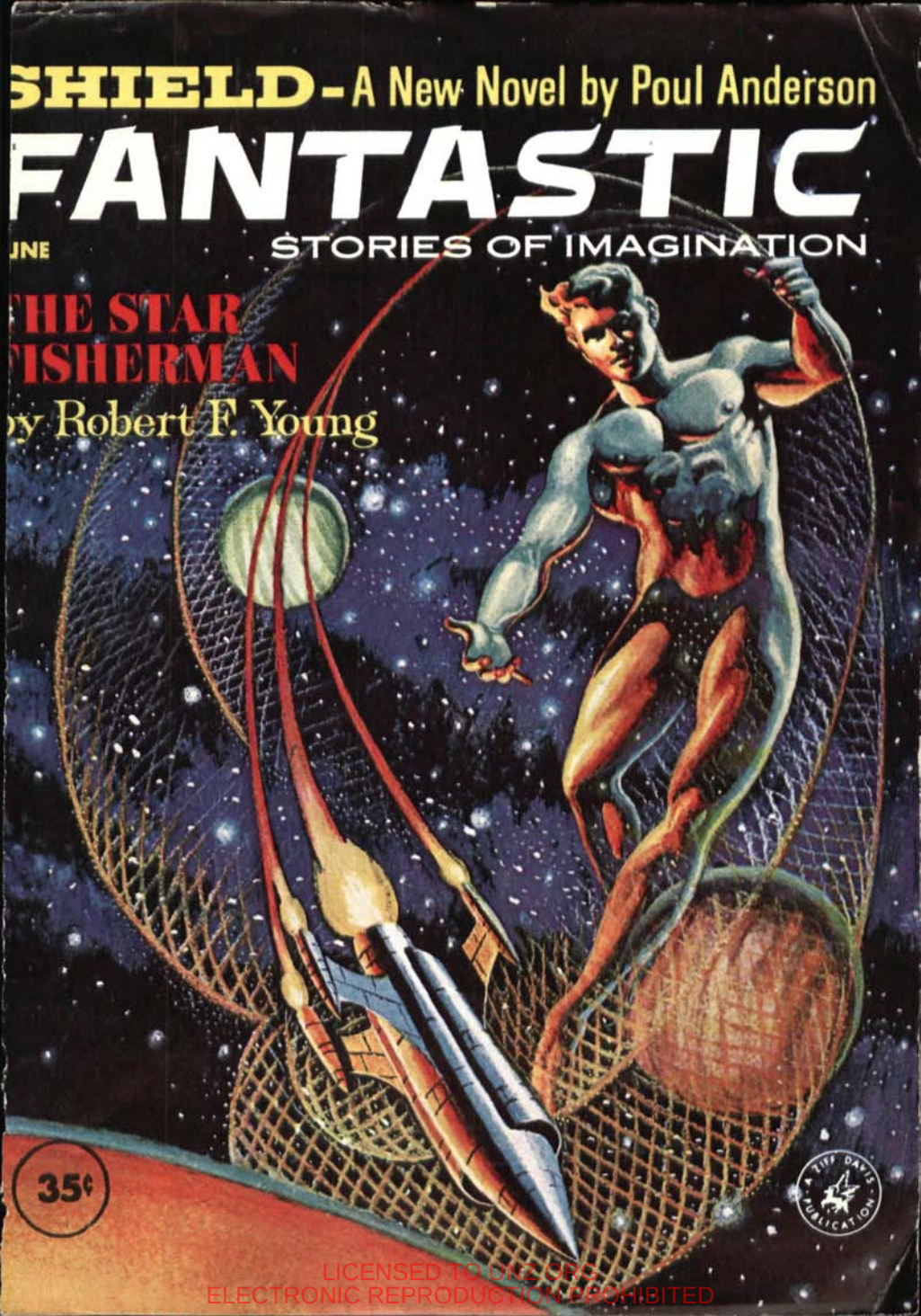
THE STAR FISHERMAN

by Robert F. Young



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STORIES OF IMAGINATION

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Illustrating *The Star Fisherman*


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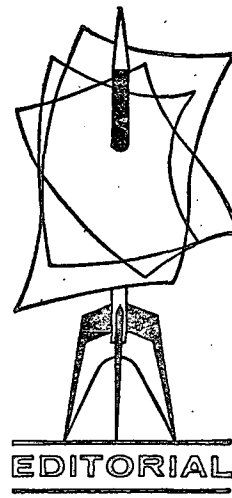


THE mad scientist who seeks to change the sex of embryos is, it turns out, not quite so mad after all. Not, that is, if we can believe new Russian claims that one of their biologists is now able to produce male or female silkworms at will. And that we *can* give credence to these claims is attested to by sober American geneticists—who, incidentally, have been working for years on the predetermination of sex to little avail.

The Russian method is based on conventional genetics. Silkworms are like people in that a female embryo is formed when a fertilized egg cell contains X chromosomes from both parents, and a male embryo is formed when the cell combines an X chromosome from the mother with a Y chromosome from the dad. To get nothing but females, the Russian professor takes unfertilized eggs and subjects them to extreme high temperatures. The shock induces the eggs to reproduce without fertilization from the male. In other words, parthenogenesis—virgin birth—which produces only females.

To guarantee male silkworms, an egg is irradiated just before fertilization. Immediately afterwards it is subjected to another—but different kind of—"heat shock." In these cases the female elements of the egg cell are inhibited, and only the male elements contribute to the development of the new silkworm. Ergo: all males.

The immediate importance of this somewhat esoteric advance is that male silkworms produce about one-third more silk than female ones do. (In the long run, the price of silk summer suits may come down.) But the extrapolations are perhaps more significant. The Russians believe that the principles developed in the silkworm experiments can eventually be applied to other creatures—perhaps even mammals. In which case a nation might be able to build up a stockpile of healthy young males for military service. —NL.



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# The STAR FISHERMAN

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

*Men have fought and died, sung and cried, stolen and lied for love. Christopher Stark did all of these—and more. Over his life loomed two gigantic images: that of the beautiful Priscilla, and that of the mysterious fisher-figure in the reaches of space.*

*And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*
—Deuteronomy 19:21

CHRISTOPHER Stark was an "almost" man. He was almost brilliant, he was almost tall, he was almost broad-shouldered, he was almost well-proportioned, and he was almost handsome. His self-image, on the other hand, was everything that he was not.

Now a self-image which is not reasonably in keeping with reality can become a tiger on a man's back. Christopher Stark's tiger clawed him incessantly, and sometimes the pain was too much for him to bear. He could never stop wanting to be something more than what he really was, and he could never stop trying to convince other people that he *was* something more than what he really was. He convinced quite a few of them in his day, and in the end, when he was dying, he even convinced himself.

When he was twelve years old he boasted to his boyhood sweetheart that someday he would buy himself a shining catamaran and set forth upon the Trans-solar Sea and cast his net into the black deep and snare a thousand



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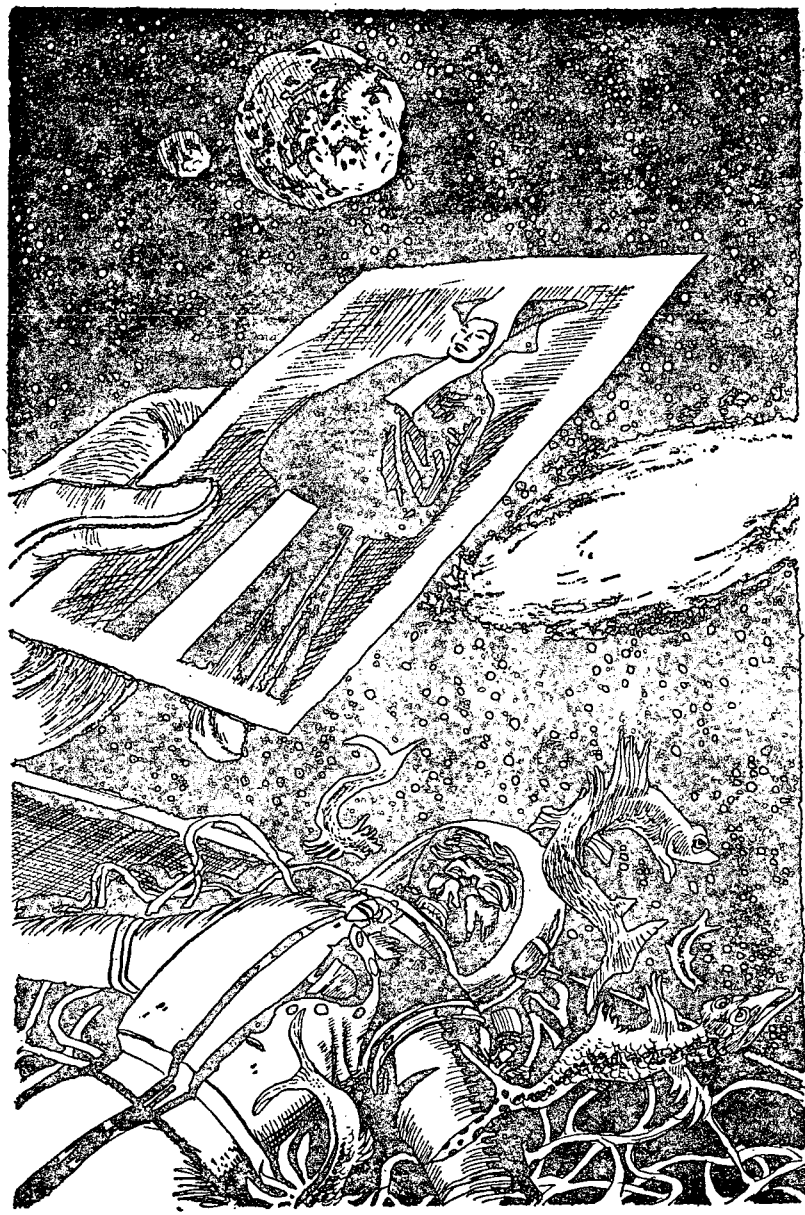



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fishes for her hair. His boyhood sweetheart eventually married the son of a sausage-maker and became a princess, but Chris, true to his word and true to his tiger, bought his catamaran and set forth and cast his net. Deep-space fishing was an occupation for which he was as ill-suited as he was for winning women, but thanks to his tiger he perfected it to a degree that put potentially greater fishermen to shame. He spurned the berths he could easily have obtained on the innumerable fishing-company trawlers and fished alone, and the catches that he brought in to the Tethys fisheries were tremendous. So were the hangovers that he took back with him to the Trans-solar Sea. As the years passed, he grew more and more contemptuous of his colleagues, and fished in ever deeper waters; and finally one day, in the autumn of his youth, he cast his net and snared a dead man.

Thus his story ended—and thus his story begins.

THE dead man was drifting in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago some ten million miles from a planet that, in common with its seven sisters, was just as dead as he was. Chris did not snare the body deliberately—he knew nothing of its presence, in fact, until he pulled in his net, and even then he did not recognize the bulky spacesuited figure entangled in the magnetic mesh for what it really was. Oftentimes ordinary meteors traveled with the much smaller, diamond-like variety that men coveted and that women wore in their hair, and it wasn't until after he dragged the net and its contents from the casting deck, through the outer and inner cargo locks and into the brightly illumined hold that he realized the true nature of his catch.

The minute he deactivated the magnetic field, the figure collapsed limply to the deck amid a shower of glittering "fishes." Carefully Chris unscrewed and removed the rime-coated helmet. The face down into which he gazed was the face of an old, old man; and yet, despite its cobwebbed eye-corners, its sunken cheeks and cadaverous complexion, it emanated a swiftly-fading radiance that cast doubt upon the recent death that the rolled-up eyes bespoke. Nevertheless, death had come, and it had come to stay, though whether it had come before or after its victim had been cast adrift in space was a question to which Chris could supply no answer.

He cut away the rest of the suit, revealing an age-shrunken body clad in leisure-class clothing that was much too large for it. Methodically he went through the pockets. They contained no



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identification of any kind, but they did contain a small roll of bluebacks. He also found a pen, an unwritten-in notebook, and a glossy new photograph. He threw the pen and the notebook away, and pocketed the bluebacks. They would compensate him partly at least for the full catch he had been robbed of. Finally he looked at the photograph.

He was never quite the same afterward.

IT was a photograph of a girl. A severe black dress enshrouded her from neck to ankles, and a black bonnet with an immaculate white brim imprisoned her hair. It was an ensemble designed to hide, rather than to enhance, feminine charms, and yet her loveliness flamed forth with a vividness that drove back the gray and brooding shadows of the room in which she stood. Her tawny hair peeped in waves and ringlets from the edges of its bonnet-prison, haloing her face and softening the superimposed sternness of her mouth and chin. The face itself was heart-shaped; the green eyes were wide-apart, as were the Slavic cheekbones. The cheeks were thinner than they should have been, and the nose was slightly turned up; but neither defect could disturb so close an approach to perfection. And as for the severe styling of her dress, it only served to define the flatness of her stomach and the fullness of her thighs, and to emphasize, with a sort of sartorial litotes, the fact that her breasts were in blossom.

Christopher Stark turned the photograph over with trembling hands. On the back, a name and address had been written in spidery, unsure letters: *Priscilla Petrovna, Miltonia, Europa.* Yes, he thought, it would have to be Europa, for where else but on Europa did women dress to drive men away? Where else but on Europa was sex synonymous with sin? He had never been there himself, but he had talked with star fishermen who had been. In the heavens of Europa, massive Jupiter brought to mind Hell itself, and as a result, Catholic, Protestant and Jew had merged to found a new Puritanism. It takes a puritanical god to cope with a visible hell, and on the barren plains of Europa the ghosts of John Milton and John Bunyan walked side by side, and woe betided those who crossed their paths.

Standing among the tiny piscine meteors that would someday adorn the hair and dangle from the pierced noses of the women of Earth, New Earth (nee Venus), and Tethys, standing beside the dead man who had robbed him of two-thirds of his



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catch; standing there in the hold of his robot-brained catamaran, rooted to the steel deck by his magnetic fishing boots, Christopher Stark looked at the photograph of the girl again and knew his destiny. The women in his life, other than those he had bought and paid for, had been few and far between, but there had been enough of them for him to know that the woman whose likeness he stood devouring now was the one for him.

He gazed down at the dead man. Her grandfather, probably; possibly her great grandfather. In either event, Priscilla Petrovna would be beholden to the man who returned him to Europa for a decent burial. He, Christopher Stark, would be that man. Supplies could be obtained on Europa from the N.E.S.N. contingent stationed there—at twice their original price, perhaps, but they could be obtained. And so could fuel. He needed both supplies and fuel, Christopher Stark did, and he needed something else far more. He needed love. He had needed it all his life, and the need had created an emptiness in him that he had been at a loss to understand till now.

HE kicked off his boots and slipped out of his tanks and togs; then he ascended the hatch ladder to the galley. From the galley it was but a few steps to the control room. As he stepped through the doorway the port-viewscreen caught his eye, and he stopped in his tracks, momentarily stunned.

He had never seen the constellation before. He had not known, in fact, that such a constellation existed.

The port-viewscreen employed a 100″ cathode tube and reduced objects to one-third of their actual size; and yet it was barely able to frame the star pattern that the port-camera was telecasting. The pattern delineated a macrocosmic star fisherman casting a macrocosmic net.

Compared to him, Orion was a pygmy, Andromeda, a baby girl. The stars of his arms and shoulders ran the gamut from red to blue, from giant to dwarf, from Population I to Population II. His eyes were supernovae, his hair was a cosmic storm. The pale blur of a distant island universe was his navel, and the nebula-pillars of his mighty legs caught and threw back the red-golf radiance of the Centauri trilogy. The net which he had just cast, and which seemingly had ensnared the catamaran, was compounded of a vast sprinkling of nearer stars, and through its interstices showed the coruscating waters of the sea of space.

Overwhelmed by grandeur too great for his mind to grasp,



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Christopher Stark involuntarily lowered his eyes. When he raised them again, the constellation was gone. And yet the parts that had constituted it still remained. The supernovae that had been the eyes were still there, and so was the cosmic storm that had been the hair. The island universe that had been the navel still pulsed faintly in the immensities, and the nebulae that had been the legs and torso still threw forth their red-gold glare. But now he saw each component out of context with the whole, and try as he would, he could not reattain the perspective that had enabled him to view the over-all design.

Had he really seen the constellation at all? he wondered, as he punched out a destination card for Europa. Or had his unconscious mind created a visual wish-fulfillment fantasy and tied it in with available phenomena? He did not know, and in all probability he never would. But there was one thing that he did know—

The star fisherman had been himself.

TO get mid twenty-third century Europa, take away Jest and youthful Jollity, and Sport that wrinkled Care derides. Take away warm sunlight and soft rains. Take away the singing of birds, and the flowers that appear on the earth, and take away the Grape that can with Logic absolute the Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute. Now throw a glowing acorn up into the sky and call it Sol. To get Miltonia, scatter a handful of small prefab huts over a frozen slough of despond, and add two large huts, one with a steeple that thrusts like a rusted needle into the brooding sky, the other with four ithyphallic stacks that emit a thick foul-smelling smoke. The hut with the steeple is the Neo-puritan Church, and the hut with the stacks is the factory where omazone, Miltonia's sole *raison d'etre,* is processed. To get Calvinville, Brownsville, Hutchinson's Corners and Bunyantown, repeat the *modus operandi* four times. Now arrange the five villages in a wide circle and place the Europa spaceport in the center. You have only three more props to go —the tower, where a reluctant contingent of the New Earth Space Navy maintains a round-the-clock tour of duty, the barracks where the off-duty personnel sleep, and the fuel house. Place the tower on the perimeter of the port, and dig two nearby holes. Bury the barracks in the first and the fuel house in the second.

Standing in the tower window, Christopher Stark watched the laborious approach of the snow-



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tractor over the windrowed plain. Preceding the tractor was a small snow-runabout driven by the messenger whom the tower operator had dispatched to Miltonia with the news that a ship had arrived bearing an unidentified dead man who had been found drifting in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago and who had had in his possession a photograph of Priscilla Petrovna. Upon the wide seat of the tractor sat two women and a man.

Chris waited till the brief caravan had almost reached its destination before he descended the tower stairs to the locks. After swallowing an oxygen tablet, he stepped out into the thin cold air. Despite the bulky parka that all but engulfed her, he identified Priscilla instantly, and it was she to whom he spoke when the tractor grunted to a stop. "I'm Christopher Stark," he said, handing her up the photograph. "I thought perhaps that the man I found might be your grandfather."

She took the photograph from him and gazed at it with green-gold eyes. Looking up at her, Chris drank deeply of her profile. Yes, she was the one, his heart sang. His whole being knew it now.

Presently she slipped the photograph into a pocket of her parka and looked down at him. "Wilt thou show us the body?"

He nodded, and she and the tall dour man who was her father and the short dumpy woman who was her mother climbed down from the seat, followed him into the tower and thence into the first-floor storeroom where the dead man, enshrouded in a tarpaulin, lay upon a makeshift bench. Chris uncovered the face, and the three Petrovnas looked down upon the frozen features for some time. At length Priscilla raised her eyes. "Wouldst thou mind leaving us alone for a moment, Mr. Stark?" she asked.

HE went out and stood in the late-afternoon dimness and tried to smoke a cigarette. The oxygen-starved atmosphere thwarted him, and he flung the butt at the sinking acorn-sun. Priscilla appeared at his elbow. "The body is that of my grandfather," she said. "My father's father. My mother's father died when she was still a child." She paused. Then, hesitantly, "Wouldst thou care to accompany us to our humble home and accept our hospitality during thy stay?" she asked. "It will be but small recompense for the service thou hast rendered us, but it is all we have to offer."

"Thank you," Chris said, barely able to control his exultation. Suddenly he gave a start and stared over her shoulder at the



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horizon. Pale fires were burning all along it, and a ghastly pallor was seeping into the sky.

Turning, Priscilla sought the cause of his consternation. Then, "Do not be alarmed," she said. "It is the planet Jupiter rising."

He watched it rise as he sat in the bed of the tractor beside the dead man on the way to Miltonia. It was in its full-phase, and at first it resembled a monstrous, banded mountain emerging from a petrified sea. Then the red spot appeared, and the simile was struck from his mind. No mountain this, but a vengeful Polyphemus with a single flaming orb. The metaphor, however, proved to be as ineffective as the simile. It was as though the heavens had been split asunder to make room for a vast and turbulent mass that was neither sun nor moon nor planet, but the incarnation of Hell, and as though that were not demoralizing enough, the surface of Europa took on, in the dull red radiance, the appearance of the valley of the shadow of death.

The tractor crawled through the shadow, the prayers of the three Petrovnas sounding above the grunting of the motor. Christopher Stark had never seen Jupiter at such close range before, and the religion which he had inherited from his middle-class parents—a religion compounded of reassuring sayings, Christmas trees, Easter bonnets, turkeys, cranberry sauce, and prosperity, and presided over by a benevolent, all-forgiving god—proved inadequate for the ordeal. On Europa you needed an unbending, eye-for-an-eye god—a god who could fight the devil on the devil's own ground and with the devil's own weapons—and it was as logical as it was inevitable that such a god should have come into being.

THE wake lasted seven days. On Europa, daylight and darkness were practically indistinguishable; nevertheless, the moon's eighteen-hour rotation period had been prorated into three equal portions—morning, afternoon, and night. Mornings, Priscilla's mother sat beside the dead man in the heatless shed that adjoined the Petrovna hut; afternoons, Priscilla's father sat with him; nights, Priscilla sat with him, and beside her sat Christopher Stark.

An unorthodox courtship, certainly—but no more unorthodox than it was fruitless. Christopher Stark talked, and Priscilla Petrovna listened. He talked of space and stars and fishes, and of the pleasure dome he would someday decree in an as yet undecided upon Xanadu. When these subjects evoked no response, he talked of the book he someday intended to write, and



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when the book got him nowhere, he surrendered to the frenzied clawing of his tiger and talked of the women he had known, augmenting their pitiful ranks with many he had not known, and while he did not say outright that all of them had been his for the taking, he broadly implied that such was the case. She gave him a long cold look, and the silence that ensued was even more embarrassing than its predecessors.

Finally, becoming desperate, he came right out and said what he wanted to say. It was the seventh and final night. During the day the temperature had risen slightly above the freezing mark, and the smell of death was in the room. "I realize," he began, "that a wake is a sacred thing, but love is sacred too, and since I'll be leaving tomorrow I think I'm justified in saying now that from the first moment I looked at your picture I've been in—"

Priscilla had risen to her feet. "Dost thou wish a glass of water?" she asked. "I will get thou one," she went on, without waiting for his answer.

When she brought it, he tried to touch her hand. She drew back from him as though he were a leper. Suddenly furious, he seized her arms and pulled her against him. The glass of water fell from her fingers and shattered on the floor. He kissed the curls that peeped from her bonnet. He kissed her forehead. He kissed her lips. The stench of the dead man intensified, hovered like malefic vapor in the room.

At last he released her and stepped back. Her face was white, her body rigid. In contrast with her marmoreal aspect, little golden fires were burning in her eyes. He could almost hear the crackling of their tiny flames. "I'm sorry," he said, aghast at what he had done. "Please forgive me."

She turned her back on him without a word and knelt down beside the crude casket in which the dead man lay. Bending her head, she said, "O almighty and vengeful Father, exact what payment Thou must for the apostasy Thou hast witnessed this night, but grant us on the morrow a clement day in order that this, thy wandering pilgrim, who has journeyed home at last, may know the reassuring radiance of Thy sun before his ascent into the maelstrom of Hell. Grant also that he may find the strength to survive the straits of Purgatory, and that he may emerge at last, purified and ennobled, before thy shining gates. Amen."

Christopher Stark tiptoed from the room.

APPARENTLY Priscilla's prayers were answered, for



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the next day dawned bright and clear—as bright and clear, at any rate, as it was possible for a day to dawn on Europa. The funeral took place in the morning, and in order that the whole village might attend, the omazone processing factory was shut down and work was suspended in the outlying fields, where the lichen-like plant was cultivated. Christopher Stark sat through the grim ceremony in the church and afterward followed the Miltonians to the cemetery. The dour expressions on the faces of adult and child alike matched the lugubrious intonations of the Bunyanesque pastor, but not a single tear was shed when at last the crude casket was lowered into the freshly-dug grave. Indeed, when each of the three Petrovnas cast a handful of snow and ice into the gaping hole, Chris got the impression that whatever sorrow they and the others might be experiencing stemmed not from the burial ceremony itself but from the fact that it was over.

That afternoon Priscilla's father returned to the omazone fields, and she and her mother went back to work in the processing factory. Left alone in the hut, Chris paced the floor in the naked radiance of the unshaded electric-light bulb that hung from the ceiling. He could remain no longer. His catamaran, refueled and re-provisioned, stood waiting for him in its berth, its hold as ravenous for fishes as his billfold was ravenous for the blue-backs that the fishes would bring in. *His* catamaran? No, not really his. Thanks to his prodigality in the New Babylon fun-houses, the back payments that he owed on it were as numerous as the fun-girls he had squandered them on. No, he could not remain—and yet he could not go either. Priscilla Petrovna was a sickness in him now, a sickness that only his having her could cure. The mute which her strait-laced religion had forced her to put upon the trumpet of her sex merely served to make the trumpet blare all the more loudly in his ears.

Would she come with him? he wondered. The unspoken question was so absurd that he almost laughed aloud. No, she would not come with him—not voluntarily, anyway.

He came to a stop in the middle of the floor. The naked light from the bulb above his head elicited every sordid detail of the room: the primitive stone hearth with its incongruous electric fire, the anachronistic iron kettle hanging incongruously over the glowing coils; the severe straight-backed chairs, the mean and narrow windows, the jerry-built ladder leading up into the drafty loft. Would it be a crime to take a woman away from such



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surroundings? Wouldn't it really be an act of mercy? His catamaran was a three-man job, and the supplies he had taken on would sustain two people for a good six months. Surely in that length of time he ought to be able to win Priscilla's love, and even if he failed and she still hated him enough to press a kidnapping charge against him, it would be her word against his—provided, of course, he brought the abduction off in such a way that there would be no witnesses, or that if there were, their testimony would be worthless.

Suddenly he remembered the little hypno-camera he had bought on impulse during his last sojourn in New Babylon. It was an out-and-out gadget devised for no other purpose than the laughs that could be obtained by hypnotizing someone while you snapped his picture; but sometimes a gadget could be a godsend. He got it out of his kit and read the instructions on the back. Then, fingers trembling, he set the hypno-dial for the maximum time-period. Priscilla's department in the omazone factory started work an hour sooner and let out an hour earlier than her mother's, and as for her father, he frequently worked till midnight in the fields. Unless Priscilla refused to have her picture taken, therefore, nothing stood between her and her abduction except the hours that had to elapse before she arrived home.

Chris was half afraid that she would refuse. She did not, however, but posed for him without demur. After that, it was merely a matter of telling her to pack her things, driving her to the spaceport in the snow-tractor, and making sure that the N.E.S.N. man on duty saw her boarding the catamaran seemingly of her own accord. He blasted off just as Hell was rising into the heavens.

THE gravity-control center made the proper self-adjustments, and the robot-brain established the catamaran in a suitable orbit around Europa which would be maintained until such time as standard operating procedure should be superseded by specific destination data. Christopher Stark wasted no time in preparing that data, and in feeding it into the time-space nexus-compensator—a mandatory device that eliminated the temporal discrepancies encountered during transphotic velocities. Then, as the catamaran broke orbit and began accelerating, he left the control room and headed for the little cabin where he had left Priscilla.

The hypno-period had worn off some time ago, and he found her lying on the narrow bunk, staring expressionlessly at the ceil-



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ing. He paused just inside the door. "I'm sorry I had to trick you," he said. "I'll treat you well, I promise."

She made no answer. She did not even turn her head.

"Look," he said, "you're only making things difficult for both of us. You're here, and there's nothing you can do about it. We're going fishing together, you and I are," he went on warmly. "I've extra gear and togs, and you can help me man my nets, and I'll split the profits with you fifty-fifty. All right?"

The catamaran gave a slight shudder as it hit C-plus velocity, and the cabin door creaked. There was no other sound in the room.

"Look at me!" Christopher Stark said. "I'm not a monster. I'll marry you, if you like. I'll marry you the minute we get back with our catch—I swear I will!"

She rolled over on her side and faced the port bulkhead. She spoke no word. Anger claimed him then, and stepping across the room, he seized her by the shoulder and turned her over. The cheap material of her dress ripped beneath his fingers. "What right have *you* got to set yourself above sex?" he demanded. "Do you know what the product you and your people produce is used for? Well I'll tell you what it's used for—it's used to rejuvenate old men! Omazone, testosterone, and black-water baths—add the three of them together and you get old rakes with young men's faces and young men's physiques on the prowl for girls young enough to be their granddaughters!"

HE felt the softness of her naked shoulder beneath his fingers then, and his eyes looked down upon the whiteness of her flesh. Weakness came into his legs, and he sank to his knees beside the bunk. He drew her to him and kissed her on the mouth. She did not resist, she did not even move; she merely lay there limply in his arms. When he released her, she fell back upon the bunk like a life-size rubber doll.

Sickened, he strode from the room. It was his first experience with passive resistance.

It was not his last. There was a Gandhi doll named Priscilla Petrovna on the ship, and when you raised its arms and let go, its arm dropped to its side, and when you kissed its lips, its lips were lifeless, and when you spoke to it, it did not answer; for Gandhi dolls are made of rubber, and rubber dolls can neither feel nor hear nor speak. Neither can they love.

Light years out from the orbital shores of Pluto, Christopher Stark cast his first net and dumped his first catch into the



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hold. In the months that followed, the hold filled inch by inch, and as the hoard of fishes grew, so too grew Christopher Stark's frustration. A Gandhi doll is not good for a man. Inarticulate, unfeeling, it lies passively in his arms, dead to his desire, indifferent to his want, unresponsive to his love. And no matter how much he may love it, without its love in return he cannot carry his own love beyond a kiss, and the time comes when he cannot carry it even that far. Yet still his love, thwarted and ignored, endures. He is a passionate Adonis burdened with a passive Venus who knows naught of the lists of love and regards the hot encounter as a sin against her strait-laced god. He is a doomed Adonis who will unconsciously seek his own destruction, not because he feels himself incapable of love, but because he is incapable of giving vent to the love he feels. Yet he will never let his Venus go.

Coming into Tethys with his six-months' catch, Christopher Stark opened his Venus' door and said, "I'm locking you in the living quarters while I go to market. The ship will be in drydock for hull-repairs and re-provisioning, but it won't do you any good to scream or pound on the hatch. The drydock personnel won't hear you, and even if they did, and let you out, you wouldn't be permitted to leave the port without a passport. Good by."

Silence.

The slamming of the cabin door.

TO get mid twenty-third century Tethys, take away the pensive nun, devout and pure, sober, steadfast, and demure. Take away loneliness and fear. Take away the slough of despond and the valley of the shadow of death. Bring back the Grape that can with Logic absolute the Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute, and banish the ghosts of John Milton and John Bunyan from the land. Now throw an even smaller acorn up into the sky and call it Sol, and usher in a Brobdingnagian gem of purest ray serene and call it Saturn. To get New Babylon, blow a trillion-dollar bubble in your macrocosmic pipe and set it down upon the land and cause green grass to grow beneath it and scatter crystalline structures all around. Add streets and laughter, fun-girls and gin; sprinkle liberally with prostitutes and pimps. Sully with a disreputable alley or two, and let the one-hundred dollar bills paid out by the fisheries that ring the port come drifting down like big blue snowflakes. To get the seven other Cities of the Plane, repeat the *modus operandi* seven times.

After marketing his catch,



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Christopher Stark headed for Fish Alley. Fish Alley was a long and sinuous snake of a street on which you could buy anything as long as it was in some respect immoral or illegal. You could buy lottery tickets, passports, birth certificates and aphrodisiac gas. You could buy mouthguns, fingernail-blades, stomp-heels, eye-gougers and coffee-flavored strychnine tablets. You could buy dirty pictures, dirty books, dirty comic films, dirty movies and dirty records, and if you wanted to badly enough you could even buy dirty dirt. Most important of all, you could buy *stong*.

*Stong* was Martian bootleg-wine, but its distinction did not end there. It relegated ordinary wine to the status of sarsaparilla. You didn't get drunk on it, you got crazy on it. You didn't get high on it, you went into orbit on it. It didn't take you out of yourself, it divorced you from yourself. It was the Id's best friend, and in Fish Alley, the Id never had it so good.

Christopher Stark went into the first *stong* bar he came to and ordered a drink and told the barmaid to leave the bottle on the bar. Christopher Stark wasn't worried about going crazy. He was crazy already. Rubber-doll crazy. Gandhi-doll crazy. Passive-resistance crazy. No, he didn't have to worry about *going* crazy.

THE first drink washed through him like sunlight after a long rain. The second flung wide the door to spring. The third turned the barmaid, who was fat and scrofulous, into Iphigenia. The fourth turned the barroom, which would have made an appropriate setting for Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, into the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. The fifth turned a pick-me-up girl who was sitting at a nearby table into Diana.

He took the bottle and went over and sat down beside her. "Did you ever hear of a Gandhi Doll?" he asked. "Listen, and I'll tell you about one."

"I know a better place we can talk," Diana said.

"About this Gandhi girl," Chris persisted. "There was this old man drifting in space, see, this old man I caught in my net when I was casting for a school of fishes." Abruptly he struck his fist on the table. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks. "That damned old man," he said. "That damned dirty old man! If it hadn't been for him, I never would have met her."

"Sure, fisher-boy, I understand. Come on, we'll go to my place, and you can tell me all about it."

The Temple of Diana turned around three times, and Diana doubled. Chris reached out and found one of her four hands. "All



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right," he said. "Let's get going."

The sordid little room in which he awoke some twelve hours later was reminiscent of Raskolnikov's fictitious garret in ancient St. Petersburg. His head was a raw wound, and Diana was gone. So was his billfold. When he sat up, a fat Tethys cockroach ran down the bedpost, rattled across the filthy floor and disappeared into a hole in the wall.

He went looking for Diana. Thanks to his habit of keeping a few bluebacks in a different pocket from the one in which he carried his billfold, he wasn't quite broke, and by the time he found her he had cancelled out some of the effects of his hangover by means of a well-known traditional therapy. She was sitting in a crowded *stong* bar with her pimp. Only she wasn't Diana any more—she was an old whore with a face like a Roman ruin.

Furious with himself for having picked her up, he strode across the room, seized her purse and dumped its contents on the table. His billfold was not numbered among them. She was so stoned that she didn't even recognize him, and she began to scream. Probably she would have screamed anyway. He grabbed her youthful pomaded pimp and went through his pockets. His fingers came upon a roll of bluebacks, and he confiscated it. The pimp seized his arm. "Thief!" the pimp shouted. "Pickpurse!" He faced the crowd of malcontents, miscreants and misfits that was gathering around the table. "You saw him brice me—are you going to let him get away with it?"

Chris tried to free his arm. The pimp hung on for dear life. The cordon tightened around the table. Chris swung then, connected; in sudden fury, he swung thrice more, then leaped over the prostrate body on the floor and squirmed and twisted his way out into the street. Someone had called the police, and a patrol 'copter was descending. Instinctively he began to run.

REALIZING that he was only attracting attention to himself, he slowed to a brisk walk. If it hadn't been for Priscilla's presence on board his catamaran, he would have returned to the bar and taken a chance on his story. With Priscilla on his hands, however, he did not dare. Keeping her imprisoned for longer than a few days was unthinkable, and if the police did not believe him, and detained him for any length of time, he would have to tell them about her. She could then press a kidnapping charge against him with a vengeance, and if his keeping her under lock and key failed to substantiate it, the hypno-camera with its undeveloped roll of imperishable film, which he had foolishly neglected to jet-



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tison, would. No, he could not go back, even though by running away he would lose his right, in the eyes of Tethys law, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty—a handicap that, judging from what he had heard about Tethys courts, would virtually assure his conviction.

After passing through the city locks, he stopped in the drydock office to pay his bill. The visiphone buzzed while the clerk was handing him his receipt. "Yes?" the clerk said, turning on the receiver.

The fact that appeared on the screen bespoke authority. So did the voice that crackled on the receiver-mike: "Lieutenant Berrand, New Babylon Police, speaking. We have an alert on a fisherman named Christopher Stark. Do you by any chance have his ship in drydock?"

So they knew his name then! His erstwhile Diana must have taken note of his identification papers before destroying them, and as a result had been able to identify him for the police—though she had undoubtedly done so by proxy. He was out of the office in less than a second, and running toward his ship. "Stop him, someone!" the clerk shouted. "Stop him!"

No one did. The catamaran had been eased out of drydock into an empty berth, and stood ready to go. After closing the outer and inner locks behind him, he glanced at the batten-board to see if the cargo locks were secured, then he turned on the control-room radio and tuned it in to the New Babylon police-band. The charge against him proved to be assault-and-robbery—a charge upon which a newly-enacted interplanetary law imposed a five-year statute of limitations. Perhaps it might turn out to be a godsend in disguise. For years he had needed a force above and beyond his own will power to keep him away from Tethys, and now fate had provided him with one. Tethys had recently seceded from the Terran Empire and at the moment was so unpopular with Earth and New Earth authorities that it received no co-operation whatsoever in the matter of extradition. Hereafter he would market his catches on New Earth then, and salt away his profits in a reliable bank. New Earth had its cesspools too, and one of the worst of them was the major fishery center, but compared to New Babylon, Nantucket II was a child's garden of verses, and presented very little in the way of temptation to a sophisticated fisherman such as himself. He would frequent its seamy side long enough to procure the new credentials he needed, but that was all.

He was starborne in a matter of minutes, his bridges flaming



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brightly in the wake of the jets. After the catamaran hit C-plus, he went into the living quarters to see if his Gandhi doll was all right. He looked in the lounge first, but she wasn't there. Next he looked in the galley. She wasn't there either. He saved her cabin till last. Probably she was lying on her bunk, sulking. She wasn't, though. Her bunk was empty. So was her cabin.

So, suddenly, was Christopher Stark.

HOURS later, the rattling of the hatch cover in the galley aroused him from the stupor into which he had sunk. Investigating, he found that the lock had been broken, and presently he located the discarded crowbar with which the job had been done. Stepping into his cabin, he discovered that the desk drawer in which he kept his petty cash had been forced open and that his petty cash was gone. So he knew, at least, how his Gandhi doll had effected her escape, and how she had obtained the wherewithal with which to bribe her way into New Babylon. What he didn't know was how he was going to endure five long years without her. The drunkard may be aware that he is better off without the drink he craves, but the knowledge will not in any way alleviate his craving.

What does the drunkard do, though, when the drink is removed from the bar and the barroom is shut down for five long years? Answer: if he is wise, he exploits the situation for all it is worth and tries to cure himself.

Thus, in a similar manner, did Christopher Stark try to cure himself of Priscilla Petrovna. He searched first of all for a substitute, and found it partly in the perfecting of his trade and partly in the writing of the book that had been seething in him for years. He no longer fished at random, but pored over map after map of the Trans-solar Sea till he knew the co-ordinates of every fishing bed by heart and could calculate the probable trajectories of the schools for years to come. During the periodic intervals when he put in to Nantucket II to market his catches and to take on fuel and supplies, he patronized, not bars, but banks and libraries, depositing his profits in the former and assimilating all the information he could find on star-fishing in the latter.

HE wrote the book four times before he gained sufficient mastery of the English language to enable him to say what he wanted to say in the way that what he wanted to say should be said. Then, his apprenticeship behind him, he threw away his first four attempts and embarked upon the fifth. At last the words



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commenced to flow; at last the scenes began to take on depth and color; at last the action broke free from the morass of hackneyed phrases through which it had been laboring and took on wings. He wrote about himself, or thought he did. Actually, his self-image was his hero. But that was all right. Few novelists have the honesty of Stendhal, and even Stendhal was oftentimes remiss when it came to setting himself down on paper. Christopher Stark's protagonist was a star fisherman named Simon Peters. He was tall and broad-shouldered and well-proportioned. He was brilliant, and he was beautiful. He was a demigod, in fact, and in common with most demigods he had an Achilles' heel, and his Achilles' heel was women. He was as much a fisher of females as he was of fishes, and his catches in both categories were legion. In the background loomed the constellation of the Brobdingnagian star fisherman that Chris had glimpsed—ages ago, it seemed now—and overshadowing the action was deep space itself. The title emerged of its own accord: *The Fishes of the Sea.*

When he put in to Nantucket II toward the end of the fourth year, he dispatched the manuscript to a New Boston publishing house and laid over awaiting a reply. He waited for six weeks, a period of time that freed him at last from the assault-and-robbery charge and opened up the gates of New Babylon to him once again. When at last the reply arrived, he was impatient to be gone, more ravenous than ever for his Gandhi doll. The cure had only made more hungry the appetite it had tried to sublimate, and his sickness was now a disease.

But while the cure had failed in one sense, it rewarded him richly in another. The publishing house agreed to publish his book, and when he finally set out for Tethys, his Nantucket II bank-account, sizeable to begin with, was even larger, thanks to the advance in royalties he had received. He was thirty-four by then, and the autumn of his youth was past; but winter still remained, and winter, it was said, was the sweetest season of the lot. He would see.

BEFORE looking for Priscilla, he went to the New Babylon Police Station and turned himself in. Less than an hour later, he was turned back out again with an irate admonition to watch his step and an equally irate warning to the effect that next time Big Brother would be watching, and would clobber him but good. He laughed, and headed for Fish Alley. The date was the first of April, 2253.



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This time he did not stop in the first *stong* bar he came to, nor the second, nor the third. Instead he began a systematic tour of the various backroom-agencies that specialized in forged passports. The information he wanted was not easy to come by, but bluebacks have persuasive tongues, and in the sixth backroom he visited, a bent old man dredged up a five-year-old memory of the customer Chris painstakingly described. Yes, she had been there, the old man said. The reason he remembered her was because of her strange clothing. The name she had used? The old man remembered that too, because of its odd flavor. Petrovna, that was it. Priscilla Petrovna. No, she hadn't said anything about leaving New Babylon; to the contrary, the old man had received the impression that she intended to settle down there.

Chris grimaced. He could have saved himself half a hundred bluebacks simply by looking up her name in the New Babylon visiphone directory. He proceeded to do so after leaving Fish Alley. There was only one Petrovna listed—a Miss Priscilla Petrovna. He expelled a breath of relief. She had not married then.

Should he call her? he wondered.

He decided not to. Gandhi dolls, for all their listlessness in other matters, were perfectly capable of turning off visiphones. They were capable of closing doors too, but not if you got your foot in first. The address listed in the directory was *209-9 Star Lane*. He could be there in a matter of minutes if he took an antigrav cab.

He did so. Star Lane was devoted exclusively to modest apartment structures. Ascending the ramp of no. 206, he discovered that he was trembling. He was suddenly furious with himself. Did this little Neopuritan who despised the ground he walked on simply because he had committed a sacrilege in the eyes of her vengeful god mean so much to him that he was going to go on fawning at her feet forever? Self-hatred shook him. He would turn around this very minute and get back to his ship as fast as his legs would carry him and blast off for the Transolar Sea! He went right on ascending the ramp.

AT the ninth level, he turned into a narrow corridor and walked down it till he came to a door with her name on it. Still trembling, still despising himself, he pressed his forefinger against the visitor-button. He was almost relieved when the door said, "Miss Petrovna is not at home." "Did she say where she was going?" he asked.

"Yes," said the door. "To her



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place of employment—six-one-oh Fun Street.

He was dumbfounded. Priscilla working in a *fun*-house? Priscilla a *fun*-girl? His little Neo-puritan Gandhi doll entertaining *men* for a living? He simply couldn't believe it. He didn't believe it, either, till he stepped through the entrance of no. 610 Fun Street and saw her dancing on one of the tables.

It wasn't a particularly risqué dance. Nevertheless he was shocked. He was shocked for the simple reason that it was Priscilla who was performing it. He would have been shocked even if she had been standing still. Her being on the table would have been enough in itself to shock him. Her tight, thigh-length dress would have been enough for that matter, not to mention the ring in her nose and her bobbed hair. She didn't have to *dance*.

He stood just within the entrance, incapable for the moment of proceeding another step. Saturn had risen, and showed like a great and shining jewel through the transparent roof. Its argent luminescence, pouring prodigally down into the room, bathed objects and persons alike in a radiance that paralleled the brightness, but not the harshness, of Old Earth sunlight. Watching the subtle interplay of silvery light and slightly darker silvery shadow, he thought he understood why Priscilla had changed.

She had changed because Hell no longer hovered over her head. She had changed because she no longer needed to identify sex with sin. She had changed because she no longer had to walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

He willed himself to step farther into the room, deeper into the jewel-light. She saw him then, and stopped in the middle of her dance. The *avant garde* combo that had been accompanying her movements ceased operations also, and a thunderclap of silence shattered the cacophony. Priscilla put the silence to rout. "Chris!" she cried, leaping down from the table and running across the floor to meet him. "Chris!"

AGAIN he found himself in a state of disbelief. He came out of it with her kisses on his lips. "Chris," she said again, "Chris, Chris! I've counted the days and the months and the hours. I knew—I hoped, I prayed —that you'd come back!"

They walked hand in hand through the silvery Saturnian rain to her apartment structure. They climbed the ramp side by side, arms swinging, fingers intertwined. He dwelled deep in a dream now, a dream compounded of wonderment and delight. Was this the same Priscilla Petrovna



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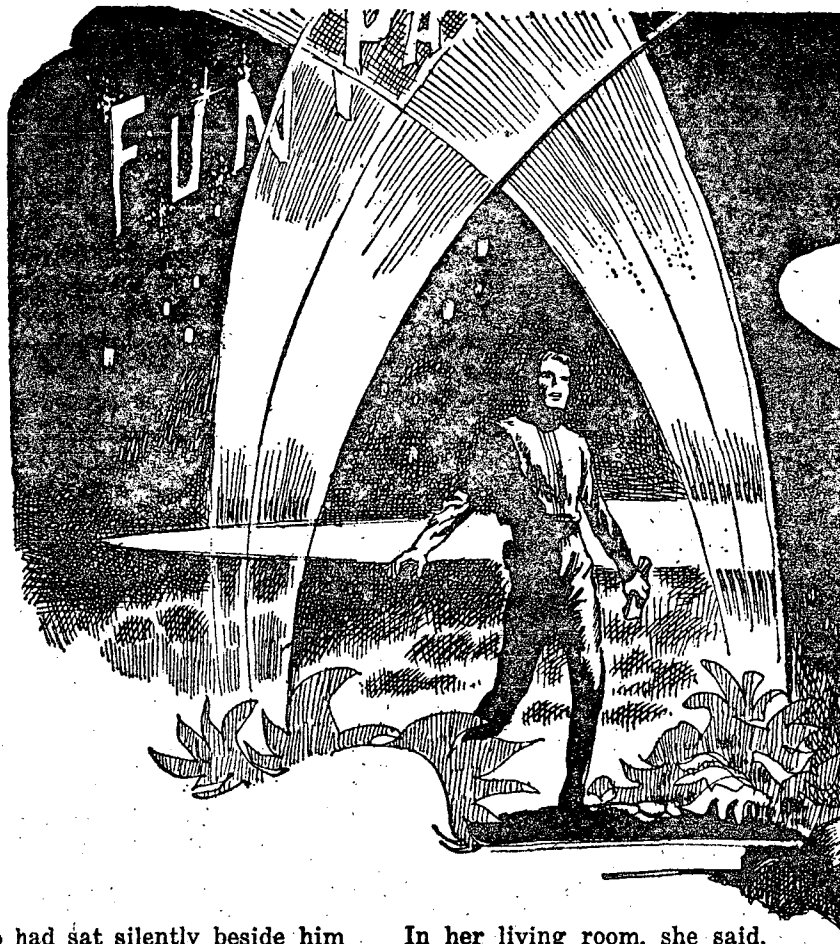


who had sat silently beside him in the heatless little shed on Europa? Was this the languid Gandhi doll who had driven him half of of his mind in the wastes of the Trans-solar Sea? Where were the golden fires of hatred that had once burned so brightly in her eyes? Surely they had not gone out completely.

In her living room, she said, "I've missed you, Chris." In her bedroom, she said, "These are the others."

It was difficult, swimming to the surface of the fathom-deep dream. "The others?" he said, like a golem made of wood. "What others?"

She pointed to a row of snap-



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shots on the wall above her bed. "You know what others," she said.

He leaned across the bed, gripping the headboard to support himself. The snapshots were of men. He did not look at them closely—he knew he would be sick if he did—but he counted them. *Nine,* he counted. *Nine.*

He straightened. For a moment he thought that he was going to faint. Priscilla was regarding him triumphantly, and the golden fires were burning once again in her eyes. *My God, how she must hate me!* he thought. He had known, of course, that there had been other men—her pierced nose had told him that. But to have her flaunt them in his face! To have her use them as a whip with which to flail him! He had not dreamed such hatred could exist.

He staggered from the room. She hurried after him, caught up to him as he was opening the corridor door. "Now that you know, what are you going to do about it, Christopher Stark?" she said.

Fury shook him then, and his hands leaped up and gripped her throat. "I'm going to kill you," he heard his hoarse voice say. "I'm going to choke out every last bit of rotten life that's in you!"

She did not move, showed not the slightest sign of fear. She knew as well as he did that his words were empty; that however much she had hurt him, she had not destroyed his love. A man cannot murder a woman because she hates him. He must hate her too—and Christopher Stark found himself wanting in the balance.

HIS hands fell away, and he ran from the room. He ran along the corridor and down the ramp to the street. In the street, he almost collided with a woman who was turning in toward the apartment-structure entrance. He slowed to a walk then. He walked and walked. The silvery rain of sinking Saturn faded out and disappeared. The streetlights came on. He continued to walk. After a while his footsteps took on direction, and at length he found himself passing through the New Babylon locks and out into the spaceport. Immediately his limbs grew heavy, and out of force of habit he slipped an oxygen tablet into his mouth. He saw the two New Babylon police officers then, out of the corner of his eye. They had just emerged from the locks and were hurrying toward him. He paused and stood there waiting for them to come up, idly wondering what they wanted, but not caring very much. One of them he noted absently, had a hypnogun in his hand. Now he was pointing it; now there was a kaleidoscope whirling before Chris-



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topher Stark's eyes. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Priscilla Petrovna," said the officer with the gun. "Yes sir," said Christopher Stark mechanically, and accompanied the two officers back to the city.

* * *

*Name of victim*: Priscilla Petrovna

*Time and date of death*: 5:23-5:34 P.M. 1st April, 2253, N.E.S. time

*Scene of death*: no. 206-9 Star Lane, New Babylon, Tethys

*Cause of death*: strangulation

*Murder weapon*: a pair of hands

*Witnesses*: (1) apartment no. 9 responsi-portal; (2) Sarah Bennett

*Remarks*: The accused insisted, despite the presence of his fingerprints both upon the deceased's throat and in her bedroom, and despite the testimony of the responsi-portal, the memory banks of which recorded his very words ("I'm going to kill you. I'm going to choke out every last bit of rotten life that's in you."), and the testimony of Sarah Bennett, who saw him running out of the apartment structure at approximately 5:25 P.M. on the afternoon of the murder, that he was deeply in love with the deceased and would have been incapable of strangling her. The accused's past record, however, suggested strongly that he was prone to violence, and the consuming love which he admitted feeling toward the deceased when weighed against the snapshots which he admitted seeing in her bedroom left so little doubt as to his guilt that the court refused to permit an investigation of the subjects of the snapshots on the grounds that such a procedure would impugn their reputations without serving any purpose.

*Name of the accused*: Christopher Stark

*Occupation*: star fisherman

THEY sentenced him to forty years in the penal colony on Deimos. Compared to Deimos, the island of Alcatraz is a pleasant Pacific atoll. Deimos is a true rock. According to Martian folklore, it is one of the two mountains which the giant Felikannibub tore up by their roots in a fit of anger and threw at the sun. It is unfortunate that he did not throw it hard enough for it to attain an escape velocity beyond that required for an orbit, for the Martian sky would be much better off without it. It is ugly and misshapen, and about as inspirational to look at as an old shoe.

The penal colony which the good folk of Tethys built for the chastisement of their major criminals has long since degenerated into a ruin. It had something of the aspect of a ruin in



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Christopher Stark's day. The prison proper was built of huge stone blocks, and encircled a bleak area euphemistically called an exercise enclosure. The pursuits of the prisoners were twofold: walking in the enclosure and sleeping in their cells. In addition, there was a third, optional, pursuit: thinking. And therein lay the rack, the screw, the whipping post; therein lay the price that the prisoner paid for his crime against his fellow man. Therein lay insanity.

Unless, like Christopher Stark, he could give his thinking direction. Unless, like Christopher Stark, he had a murder to erase. Unless, like Christopher Stark, he was determined to see his true love once again.

After serving his sentence, Christopher Stark would be seventy-four years old. He would, if he were lucky, have ten more years to go. How best to spend those years? How best to bet their days and weeks and months so that when at last Death took his hand it would not find him with an empty purse? Night after lonely night, Christopher Stark lay awake in his bunk, staring up through his cell window at the orange expanse of Mars, pondering the question. And all the while he knew the answer. For if there had been two Priscillas, there had to be a third. The Neo-puritan Priscilla represented one apogee of the arc of the pendulum, and the fun-girl Priscilla, the other. In between the two apogees there had to be a Priscilla who combined the two extremes, who was half Neo-puritan and half fun-girl; who was the sort of woman, in short, whom the average man falls in love with and marries. This was the Priscilla he would pursue next, and in the process change the past and erase her murder.

A LARGE order, to be sure; but *The Fishes of the Sea* had become a phenomenal best-seller, and Christopher Stark was rich. Not as rich as Croesus, perhaps, but rich enough, nevertheless, to buy quite a number of things. And so he lay on his bunk, night after night, and looked up through his cell window into yesterday. And Deimos spun upon its orbit in the vast and complex Grandfather's clock of space, and Mars turned and the Earth turned, and the solar system crept imperceptibly along upon its journey within a journey, and the Milky Way Galaxy pinwheeled lazily as it traveled with its sisters NGC 147, NGC 185, NGC 205, NGC 221, NGC 278, NGC 404, NGC 598, and M 31 toward a destination man would never know, and eventually one trillionth of a cosmic second passed, and forty years went down the drain of time.



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THE sign on the frosted door said, HICKMAN REJUVENATION CENTER, *New Earth Branch*. The old man who had just stepped off the elevator opened the door and went in. "I have an appointment with Dr. Hickman," he told the girl behind the outer-office desk. "My name is Christopher Stark."

The girl gave him a glance that was both knowing and contemptuous, then nodded in the direction of the inner-office door. "You may go in now," she said.

Dr. Hickman was a wiry little man with bright brown eyes and wispy brown hair. He stood up when Chris entered, and shook hands. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Stark?"

Chris did so. "First of all," he said, "I want to know how many years I'll lose."

Dr. Hickman leaned forward. "But first of all, Mr. Stark, I must know how old—or rather, how young—you want to be."

"Twenty-five," Chris said.

"H'm'm."

"I'll want a different face too something a little more pleasing to the eye than the one I've got, and varied enough so that I won't be recognized. Also, I'll want broader shoulders, and about two more inches of height. Can you take care of all that too?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Hickman said. "It's part of our regular service. How old are you now?"

"Seventy-four," Stark answered.

"I see."

Dr. Hickman got a glossy booklet out of his desk, riffled through it to the page he wanted and ran a forefinger down two parallel columns of figures. Presently his bright brown eyes flicked upward. "Assuming you're in reasonably good health, ten years will get you two, Mr. Stark."

Chris nodded. He had hoped for three, but beggars can't be choosers, even when they're rich. "How long will it take?"

"Three months—possibly four." Dr. Hickman cleared his throat. "I feel ethically compelled to point out, however," he went on in a more serious tone of voice, "that we do not advise five-to-one speedups. There is always the danger, toward the end, of an acceleration of cellular breakdown, accompanied by rapid synaptic deterioration and—"

Chris interrupted him. "I'll take my chances—just give me the two years. Now, how soon can I begin?"

Dr. Hickman sighed. "Right away, if you like."

"Good," Christopher Stark said. "I'm sick of being an old man."

THE sign on the battered door said, V. WESTON, ELECTRONICS EXPERT. *Specialist in ganglion-circuit repairwork.* The tall



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broad-shouldered young man with the old-looking eyes who had just alighted from the Nantucket II anti-grav cab opened the door and went in. A middle-aged man with thinning hair and a tired face stood behind a tool-cluttered table that functioned as both counter and workbench. "V. Weston?" the visitor asked.

The middle-aged man nodded. "Yes sir."

"I'm Simon Peters," the tall man said. Then, "What do you know about time-space nexus-compensators?

Weston's voice was eager. "Why, I know everything there is to know about them. I can take them apart and put them back together blindfolded. I can—"

"Good," Simon Peters said. "I have one I want you to take apart. It's on a small ketch I just bought. Only when you put it back together, I want you to alter its mechanism in such a way that I can set it for any point in space-time I choose, whereupon it will plot a course containing the necessary spatial distance and synchronize that distance with the requisite transphotic velocity and bring the ship to the chosen point in a matter of hours. Can you do it?"

V. Weston had paled. "Yes, I can do it, Mr. Peters. That's not the point. Surely you must be familiar with the nexus-statute of the interplanetary code."

"I certainly am," said Simon Peters. "So familiar with it, in fact, that I can recite it word for word. 'Any person convicted of willfully tampering with a time-space nexus-compensator shall be liable to not more than twenty-five years in prison and not less than ten, and any person convicted of deliberately altering a time-space nexus-compensator for the purpose of retro-travel shall be liable to the death penalty'. They'll tell you, Mr. Weston, that the past belongs to the people who lived in it, and that we of today are ethically bound to stay out of it; but what they won't tell you is that they're afraid of someone going back to a previous era and amassing a fortune through his foreknowledge, thereby instituting a financial chain of events that could conceivably make the poor of today rich, and the rich of today poor. So you see, Mr. Weston, retro-travel isn't ethically wrong—it's merely financially hazardous to the powers-that-be."

Weston's accelerated blink-rate indicated that the point had gotten home. However, he was not won over yet. "The penalty is still death, Mr. Peters," he said.

"Look," Simon Peters said. "I don't know whether I can change the past. I think—I hope—I can, in a very small way. But even if I



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do, and future events *are* altered, no one can possibly be aware of the fact. So if you're apprehended, Mr. Weston, it won't be because of anything I do—or have done—in the past. Ships disappear every year, and for all we know, they and their owners make the journey into yesterday; but I have never heard of anyone being convicted, or even accused, of gimmicking a time-space nexus-compensator. So all you've really got to worry about is how much I'll pay you for the job, and you don't really have to worry about that, because I'll pay you any price you ask. What do you say, Mr. Weston?"

Some of the tiredness departed from Weston's face, and he stood up a little straighter. "I'm sick of being poor," he said.

"Good," said Simon Peters. "Come on, I'll take you to my ketch."

HE chose the date carefully. The rejuvenation center had guaranteed him two years, but he could afford to take no chances; hence he allowed two weeks leeway, and emerged in the Tethys stratosphere on the fifteenth day of April, 2251, one year, eleven months and two weeks before the day Christopher Stark would walk out of Priscilla Petrovna's apartment to be—or not to be accused of her murder.

After berthing his ship, he entered New Babylon. He tried Fun Street first, gambling that his true love had already embarked upon her career. The gamble paid off: he found her in the same house Christopher Stark would find her one year, eleven months and two weeks hence.

She was sitting at a corner table, all alone. Her tawny hair, as yet unbobbed, rippled to her shoulders. Her cheeks were fuller than they had been in Miltonia, and the sternness of her mouth and chin was less severe. He went over and sat down beside her. "You're new here, aren't you?" he said.

She gave a start when she first looked at him, and for a moment he thought she had recognized him. Apparently, however, she had not, for she merely said, "Not really new. I've been here almost a month. After working for three years in a dress shop to raise my bond, it seems like heaven."

"Oh, then you're not so new at that. My name is Simon Peters."

"Priscilla—Priscilla Petrovna."

"Will you dance with me?"

She nodded brightly, and stood up. The *avant garde* combo was not in evidence, and subdued music was emanating from hidden speakers. The edge of Saturn's outer ring was just beginning to show through the transparent roof. Seeing her again had nearly



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torn him apart. Dancing with her did. He held her tightly against him so that she would not notice the tears running down his cheeks, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he covertly wiped his eyes. The floor was nearly deserted, and no one witnessed his distress.

HE remained with her till her tour of duty was up, then he walked through the New Babylon streets with her to the apartment structure where she lived. It was the same one in which she would be living when Christopher Stark appeared upon the scene. Was the wall above her bed as yet unsullied with the snapshots that would one day hang there, Simon Peters wondered, or had the deplorable display already been begun? Her nose was as yet unpierced—true; but the wearing of nose-rings was a custom, not a law, and an unpierced nose was not an infallible sign of virginity. The little-girl kiss she bestowed upon his cheek when they said good night reassured him, and he hummed softly to himself as he walked the streets in search of a suitable place to live.

He began seeing her every day. She did not seem to mind. He bought her stoles and gowns and underthings, and fishes for her hair. But the love he sought did not materialize in her eyes, and while her kisses were remote from the Gandhi-doll kisses he had known on the Trans-solar Sea, they were remote too from the kisses which a woman bestows upon the lips of the man she loves. Small wonder, then, that he should have been surprised when, several months after he first began courting her, she asked him if she could be his mistress.

They were dancing at the time. "You know the answer without asking," he said, when at last his astonishment abated. "You knew it when I first came over and sat beside you."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I did. It's funny, isn't it, how two people can just look into one another's eyes and tell."

"Yes," he said, looking into her eyes and not finding the love that should have been there. "Why don't you ask me to marry you while you're at it?" he asked. "I might say yes."

She was startled. "Marry you? Oh, I couldn't do that. You see—"

"Yes?" he said.

"Nothing. It's just that I don't want to get married—not just yet, anyway. Shall we go now?"

"I'll get your coat," he said above the pounding of his heart.

THE next day he went with her while she had her nose pierced, and afterward he bought her the most expensive nose-



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ring he could find. His heart sang while he suprvised the selection of a fish-pendant that would do justice to the brightness of her eyes. He had been her first lover after all, he, Simon Peters had. He, Simon Peters, nee Christopher Stark.

Some of his euphoria departed when she bought a small camera and insisted on snapping his picture. Was time mocking him? Was he merely initiating the series of lovers that he was trying to avert? Had his snapshot been one of the nine Christopher Stark had seen—would see—upon the wall above her bed? He looked for it that night, but did not find it. Nor the next night, nor the next. Some of his uneasiness departed then, and as the months passed and the wall remained empty, his fears gradually went away.

But not for long. Although she was his mistress, Priscilla would neither move in with him nor permit him to move in with her. Neither would she permit him to visit her every single night, maintaining that if she did, he might grow tired of her. Consequently, since he did not dare to show himself too often in public places for fear of being identified as Christopher Stark and apprehended for the assault-and-robbery charge, much of his time was relegated to brooding in the little out-of-the-way room he had rented. The inspiration for his brooding, however, arose, not from misgivings concerning his growing tired of Priscilla, but from misgivings concerning Priscilla's growing tired of him.

As time passed, he began to suspect her of having another lover. Not because of any direct evidence, but because of the flowering of young womanhood that was taking place within her. He was sure that he himself was not the cause of the expectant light that came with ever-growing frequency into her gold-green eyes, the smiles that danced with ever-increasing abandon on her lips, and the happiness that gave her face an ever-greater radiance; and if he was not the cause, then someone else was, and that someone had to be someone she loved.

Perhaps he had eliminated all of her lovers save one. Still and all, though, that one could very well be the one who had made—or who would make—the attempt on her life.

He would see—and soon, too. Much too soon.

IN settling for two years, he had had in mind two years in a young man's life. The rejuvenation center had given him a young-man's body, but it had not given him a young-man's mind. As a result, he had retained an old-man's perspective of time, and two years to a man



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of seventy-four is a giddy toboggan ride down an ever icier slope. In Simon Peter's case, the finish-line lay in the valley of the shadow of death.

As the landscape of the days and weeks and months flashed past, harbingers of that finish-line began to appear. His step lost its lightness, his breath grew short; his vision dimmed and his hearing began to fail. And yet no visible evidence of his imminent crossing manifested itself. He was still ostensibly young, still ostensibly healthy; no lines marred his handsome face, and his eyes seemed bright and clear.

But he was dying, and he knew it, and sometimes when he awoke during the night and could not fall back to sleep, he buried his head on Priscilla's breast and clung to her like a frightened child. And if she was not there, and the bed turned out to be his own, he buried his head in his pillow, and cried. And slowly, ineluctably, his time ran out.

ON the afternoon of the first of April, 2253, Simon Peters was standing in the shadows behind the *avant garde* combo when Christopher Stark came into the fun-house. Christopher Stark did not see him. Christopher Stark saw no one except the girl dancing on the table.

Simon Peters followed them when they left. After they entered no. 206 Star Lane, he took up a position just to the right of the entrance. He was taken aback when Christopher Stark came running out right on schedule. He had hoped that by eliminating the snapshots he had altered the scheme of things at least a little bit. He hurried into the building just as Christopher Stark nearly collided with Sarah Bennett. Neither of them saw him, and he met no one on the ramp. He was breathing hard when he reached the ninth level, and he had to stop to rest. Glancing at his watch, he saw that the time was 5:27 P.M. He would have to hurry: her would-be murderer might be in the apartment already. Gripping the hypno-gun which he had bought that morning and which he carried in his right-hand coat-pocket, he hurried down the corridor.

Her door was ajar. Without pausing, he pushed it all the way open and stepped inside. Priscilla was standing in the living room, an expression on her face that he had never seen there before. She started when he entered; then disappointment came into her eyes. "Oh, it's you," she said.

Ignoring her, he walked across the room and stepped into the kitchen. There was no one there. Next, he went into the bedroom. There was no one there either.



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Good, he thought. He would be there waiting when her murderer arrived.

He saw the snapshots then. On the wall above her bed. He advanced across the room, leaned across the familiar bedspread. He counted them. *Nine,* he counted. *Nine.* The first one was strikingly familiar. Peering closer, he saw that it was the snapshot she had taken of him.

She had followed him into the room. "Simon, what's come over you—" she began. And then, her gaze joining his, "Oh, you've seen them. I didn't mean for you to."

"Your lovers, no doubt," he said, confronting her.

"Not, not really—except for the first. For you. The others are men I let pick me up in the street and take me home. I never saw any of them afterward. You see, one would not have been enough." She reached out and touched his cheek in a gesture that came close to being tender. "Poor Simon," she said. "I did not mean to hurt you too."

He could feel the muscles of his face contracting, and there was a throbbing in his forehead. "Who did you mean to hurt?"

SHE sighed. "Listen, and I will try to explain. On Europa, where I used to live, a man came to us bearing a dead man he thought to be my grandfather. On Europa, the people are desperately unhappy, and when people are desperately unhappy they can find relief in only one way—by exploiting someone who is worse off than they are. Bringing a Europan girl a dead man is like bringing a New Earth girl a box of candy. She will not refuse it, even if it does not rightfully belong to her. Her parents would not let her, and neither would the people of her village. No, she will claim it—and if she is human, she will develop a tender spot in her heart for the man who brought it. In my case, I did not need to. I—I fell in love with him the minute I saw him—so much in love that I feared to speak lest I betrayed myself."

Simon Peters looked at the snapshots on the wall. His voice cracked when he said, "Go on."

"Oh yes," she said, "the snapshots. The—the other men." He looked at her then, and saw the golden fires burning brightly in her eyes, the golden fires that he had once thought to be fires of hatred but which he now knew to be fires of love. "He threw the women he had had in my face, this man did," Priscilla went on, "and now I have thrown the men I have had in his. Now the score is even. For five years I planned and waited for the moment he would return. Now he has run away again, this time to nurse



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his wounds; but he'll be back. He'll be back because he cannot help himself, because he loves me as much as I love him. Do you know what it's like, Simon, to love someone so much it makes you sick inside?" she asked. "That is how I love this man. And do you know what it's like to love someone that much and yet not be able to indulge your love because the punishment has not yet been exacted? Do you know what it is like to worship the ground someone walks on, and have the ground forbidden to you? Do you, Simon? Do You?"

He realized a long while later that it was her slender throat that his hands were gripping, that it was her tender flesh into which his furious fingers had dug. He released her then, and she slipped limply to the floor and lay there staring sightlessly at the ceiling. All he could think of was a rubber doll.

THERE were the *stong* bars. After reaching Fish Alley, he stopped in the first one he came to and ordered a drink and told the barmaid to leave the bottle on the bar. It was the way it had been the last time, almost. This time, though, the room didn't turn into the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. It turned into a long, doorless corridor with blood-red walls. At the end of it a huge idol sat upon an obsidian throne. He walked down the corridor slowly, stumbling now and then. The idol's hair was tawny in hue, and consisted of tiny metallic snakes. Her eyes were green-gold agates. Her black dress was pulled above her knees, and her white-brimmed bonnet was pushed back from her forehead. The front of her dress was open, and one of her marble breasts hung out. A sacrifice had just been performed on the altar that stood before her throne, and she was frozen in the act of plucking an object out of the victim's face. The victim was Christopher Stark, and the object was an eye.

Simon Peters threw the bottle he was carrying at her, and collapsed unconscious to the floor.

THE dark alley in which he awoke smelled of sewer gas. His billfold was gone, and so was his hypno gun and his watch. His head was throbbing. He got to his feet after a while, and staggered into the street. His chest bubbled when he breathed, and his legs would barely support him. For some reason his trousers were too long for him, and he kept tripping on the cuffs. An eternity passed before he reached the city-locks, another, before he finally gained his ketch.

He blasted off without delay, and set the time-space nexus-



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compensator for his final destination. With a little luck he could still upset the apple cart of time. With a little luck he could, by altering a single moment, change his entire life. *Begone,* he would say to young Chris Stark. *Cast your net in safer waters!* Right now, though, he was tired. Right now, he would sleep.

He retired to his small cabin and collapsed upon the bunk. The shuddering of the ketch as it came out of transphotic awakened him. "Priscilla," he murmured, and eyes still closed, reached out for her beloved body. His hands found nothing but twisted sheets and emptiness, and at last, with horrible abruptness, the realization that she was dead and that he had killed her got through to him. His anguish was unendurable. He got up and fumbled among his belongings for some token, some sign, that she had not ceased to be, some remnant of her that would drive the shadow of her death into a dark corner of the room; and he found, finally, the little hypnocamera with its undeveloped roll of imperishable film. He was as excited as a little child, and like a little child, he got his developing kit and sat down in the middle of the floor and began to play. The picture came out perfectly. She was so lovely that he wanted to cry. He covered her image with kisses, and turned the photograph over and wrote her name and address on the back. *Priscilla Petrovna,* he wrote. *Miltonia, Europa.*

A bell began to ring. Thrusting the photograph into his pocket, he went to investigate. It was the bob-bell: a school of fishes was approaching the catamaran—it was time to get into his togs and tanks. After reversing the ship's direction and adjusting it to a speed just beneath average meteor-velocity, he hurried down into the hold. He wondered what made him so weak. His legs felt like broomsticks, his arms, like pipestems. His hands had atrophied into shriveled claws. A phrase came out of the thickening forest of his memory and trailed through the murky clearing of his mind —*an acceleration in cellular breakdown, accompanied by rapid synaptic deterioration.* He shook his head. The words were meaningless to him. Opening the locker, he took out one of the spacesuits and struggled into it. He could not find his net. No matter. He would reach forth and snare the fishes with his hands. "For you, Priscilla," he whispered, "for you," and activated the locks and stepped through them—into space.

Ketches have no outer decks. Nor are ketch-spaceboots magnetized. Ketches are not catam-



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arans, never were and never will be.

THUS Simon Peters, nee Christopher Stark, torn by his own impetuosity from the gravitic pull of his hurtling craft, went into free fall in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago where he had thought in his naïveté to rip out a single stitch in the cosmic hem of time. As he fell, Death reached out and touched his hand, and he pulled his hand away. "No," he said, "not yet—I do not yet know who I am." At his feet lay the red-gold billiard ball of Alpha Centauri. At his elbow, a pale planet poised. Coldness came and grew within him, and as the coldness grew, so too grew Christopher Stark. The red-gold sun diminished, and the pale planet waned; the whisperings of the immensities sounded faintly in his ears. He looked forth upon creation with supernovae-eyes and breathed deeply of the abysmal darkness of the night. There was still time for one more cast. The myriad stars of his macrocosmic net rustled as he unfurled it, and the stellar sinews of his Brobdingnagian arm grew taut. Back, back now, the shoulders slanting, now turn and slowly turn, the arm rising, the arm of stars, of giants and dwarfs and little motes of dust that micro-men call worlds; the star-arm rising and the star-net swinging wide; now out, now down, the stars he thought, the stars that are my genes, my chromosomes, my corpuscles, my strength, my life, my death and my undoing, the white stars and the blues, the reds, the flaming yellows—I am all—all am I, Christopher Stark, immensities am I, global clusters and cosmic storms; nebulae and Pleiades and island universes; I am the stars and space, I am the star fisherman in all the coruscating glory of his youth . . . and he swung his great and glittering arm and cast his net—

And snared himself.

**THE END**

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# ENDED

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrator SUMMERS

*I was walking along in my head ball, had just planted nine flowers and a vegetable row, when I jumped into this Gloul, a shadow-wan man.*

AND though he was shade-pale he now seemed fight-angry, and I was sure he was more than a vagueness as I stared hard at him standing there. Neons bleared and shook. "Look!" he screamed, as he doubled two small-small fists, "I'm not takin' bumps from one of you jazzy Wheelgos racin' to get in your gasjoy to kick it up to a hundred like twice a Bighave or so. I'm from ANYplace else; I'm up from the core; I'm in from the big Out-there; I've got my rights."

I noted a look of old bombardments on his face, how one eye was milky and wrecked where he



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glinted up at me from a less-than-five-feet build, how the other was of total disaster. And a mien of hurt aesthetics, more than flesh-sorrows, sent a kind of pale green illness all through his standing there. "I'm sorry," I said, "oh sorry. And excuse me the bumps. I'm against machinery too. And I'm not a Bighave. In fact I'm a Nohave, except I'm a Muchhave in the things that count to me. D'ye see? I've just planted nine flowers and a bean row in my think ball. And that means more than oil wells could ever, to me. D'ye hear?"

"Hah!?"

"I mean I'm going back, digging down, getting out. We're through! The world is wrong-tending, and I'm retreating."

He brightened and clung to my sleeve, reaching through the ball. "Could we?" he said.

"I hadn't counted on a traveling companion," I said. "I reckoned to go it all alone back, while the big Caddies rolled and the fortunes of gold filed by—not flowers, not poems, not songs, nor thoughts of any of these along the cranium barriers.—You know how to use the ball?"

He looked at me in a very funny manner, sly, you know, crossing the disaster eye and the milky and sick one in several patterned ways. Indeed he ran a full gamut from the very common crosses up to a curious dance of crossed glances that I suppose was easy enough for this Gloul, this shadow-wan guy. "I am the blackout," he said, "yet a true-seeing. And that takes care of the squealing streets, the noises and the neons both, for me and any companion."

"The main thing," I said, "is to be able to dig a hole. I've a big one started out in an old vacant lot. Are you strong?"

"Much more than I seem," he replied. Then, with a bit of hocus and pocus, he clutched down two shovels and a pickaxe from the fluorescent air—there where the ad signs picked at us with their long clacking fingers exhorting us to go, to buy, to see some pleasure quickly; and the road-rangers whammed by with the Wheelgos gassily breezing up miles.

IN a weed-clogged vacant lot we dug for thirty-one days that first time, sustained by such aesthetic things as poetry we said to each other, and the songs we sang, and sometimes a hamburger or some plain bun we furtively pilfered up topside from the Morethanenoughhaves. And we passed by ledges, going down, the father and mother bars where the bones were and the grandfather and grandmother bars and on-and-on, and saw the hair that had survived with the bones; and most of these things



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lay quietly, just nodding a little greeting as we passed or gleaming out of the eyes comradely with a small look of yes-I-know. But also there were the grim days in the ledges going down when we passed by the bones of regret and encountered the hair of lost wishes wound and tangled in the bleak-face Rock of Time. And these seemed to shriek to us, "Oh turn back, our brothers, climb back to the clacking fingers of cool fire and all the pleasures that wait your rushing-to in your age of Playandbigjoy-now." And once a huge grandmother skull with mouth like a break in a wall lay resentful among her bones that never stilled. It seemed she had denied herself a flesh-pleasure one time —perhaps at some long forgotten church tea she'd passed up a third-helping bun. And she regretted it, said pleasure of the flesh was all, all that remained to the bones long remembering— all else ephemeral—gone. And as we dug by she talked on through questions I had in my own mind; she screamed us to turn back.

So we came up after thirty-one days for a time-on-top. And we walked down a street in the rain, I in my walking muse ball and he in his blackout tube, until we came to the Hall of Hedo-and-a-Ho-ho. The Hall of Hedo-and-a-Ho-ho was built in the modern way, streamlined as a tear, pleasantly smooth-and-curved and with an enchanting changement of colors throughout its translucent walls where the tube-lights chased like many sunstruck fishes breaking a green wave all-the-time. It was fifty-one glorious stories toward the sky, and a right big sprawling plastic teardrop it was. Four strong spots suspended two miles up from engined blades set to run for ninety-nine hundred years played on the teardrop all-the-time. And a net of neons sprayed out to the four corners of the big town, inviting all to come down to the Hall of Hedo-and-a-Ho-ho.

WE walked up the steps toward this castle of pleasure, and the fish-lights played under us so that we stepped never twice on the same color under the plastic stair. And just before we entered the door, that was not a door but a tube, we noticed the symbols across the front wall. All imaginable pleasure seemed sculped there, from the tiniest green blade of grass drinking a warm-warm summer raindrop up to a full-scale figure of a Hedo-age man plugging his sex machine under a deep-deep purple bed.

We entered the Hall. That is, we swept in. For one moment we were walking across the fish-lights, and the next, swoozmp!

ENDED



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we were in the great Hall by tube, until jarred up softly at a joylon covered desk. "Ye-es?" Softly, oh, softly, and music in that voice, and enchantment, and a net that held strongly, softer than a spider's web. Her hair was honey-and-gold done in a sculptured do, and her neck was a stalk of white slender roading down to the V deep between mounds held firmly-yet-tenderly in the whocouldresist-IT!brassiere. Her nether limbs were on exhibit in sheerest joylon, smoke and sun-color enchantment in beige curves, and her feet greeted in tiny slippers of deep-down purple suede with a startling slash-red strap across ankles that were entirely yes-indeed! And as she swung her feet to the joylon covered desk while she put down a pale plastic phone I saw how the rich blue of her full skirt fanning out contrasted with the salmon-red of her slip and her slip's lace to make my limbs all jellyfishes and my eyeballs entirely stare. And as I gasped and gazed . . .

"Ye-es?" she repeated her music while I and my small digging chum stood there in our digging clothes, dumbfounded. Until one of us hallooed out—I forget whether he or I— "This is our first trip! We're confused!"

She became all business. She swept her legs from the joylon in a dazzle of red and dark blue, all filmy and soft-to-behold, and resolution-shaking. "Since you're new here you'll have to register, and of course pay your fees."

MY heart went down in my digging boots, but my chum surprised me and somewhat rescued the day. It seemed he had a small saving, of which he had not spoken to me. Or else he hocus-and-pocused it the way he had those tools back there when we still had our resolutions. At any rate there they were, a few crumpled bills on the joylon, and the music was speaking again. "Ye-es, quite enough for the registration, but little else except for the Tempto this time. But the Tempto can be fun, especially the first time. And since you're both new—" Then she was smiling that perfect-smile-by-the-book, and it was warm-summer all-everywhere, like being in a well-appointed yacht club in your chair, when it is frost-winter across skidrow all outside.

She sent us up to the Tempto. That is to say she motioned us and we stepped on the stair of wheels, and millions of tiny rollers bore us up to the Tempto place so smoothly we seemed yet standing below. At the Tempto room we expected another reception of beauty. But instead, a shiny metal stick tapered up to a head like a baseball bat rose out of the velvet floor at the place



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where the rollers stopped. And after wheezing some small eruption of steam and clear brake oil from its clubby end it began to address us, saying in a very gritty tone, "Received message from Miss Glamo. Two gentlemen in grave digger clothes on way to Brown 4. Amount paid entitles to four minutes at Tempto in Brown 4. Each man to have a two minute Tempto. Procedure regular, no case histories, first time. Now, two men in grave digger clothes, turn right and walk arm-in-arm until you feel a wire. That is all." Then the gleaming metal ball bat went back into the floor and a velvet lid closed over the exit so smoothly, so completely, that we felt very all-alone and more than a little fearful on that wine-red velvet rug. But there seemed no other reasonable course but to turn right and walk until we hit a wire.

WHEN we hit the invisible wire, firm friendly-seeming hands in soft pink gloves fell out of the ceiling, on long hinged-metal arms, and bore us down a hall to a small brown room. Simulated candles burned outside that room's entrance. The friendly pink hands swept the entrance panel in and tossed us into the Brown Room 4. Then turning a little corner on their overhead trolley wires the pink hands came into the room after us and began to undo our clothes. When they had us undressed they fell to massaging us gently, and other hands, in brown gloves, fell out of the room's ceiling and began to aid in the caressment. After a short period of this we were each taken to a machine, and we knew our two minutes had started. For inside the machine, in a magnified bowl of air a wonderful maiden swam dressed in nothing but her long hair-do. And entering the pool a man appeared, radiant in his rigid manhood, and he too was without clothes. And the man was I in my machine and my companion in his machine. And we chased each our wonderful maiden in the magnified bowl of air while the machines hummed with their power. Sweat rolled from our bodies while we pursued our loves round-and-round, yet we knew no discomfort—nothing but a pleasure at waiting FOR — But just as I clasped her in all her airy soft sweetness and was feeling the wonder of her air-washed limbs—I SCREAMED! a tall cry tore from the bottom bags of my lungs, and my companion mouthed a strange prayer loud and high. There had been a tremendous explosion in the phones of our headgear and our machines had lost the tiny lights far down toward which the maidens swam and ran. The magnified bowls vanished; the maidens be-

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came blank air passing across the points where the lights had been, and all was sunken in limbo, lost to blacked-out time. Two minutes! We could not have more until we paid more, and we had not more to pay.

THE pink hands, seeming less friendly now, took us, and the gloves turned hard. They whistled us around the corner, up the hall to the wire, and they cast us toward the rolling stairs. We hit a little to right of our ascent and soon were on the roll-stairs down. We coasted past Miss Glamo, who gave us not so much as a gaze now; her feet were on the joylon as she conversed with five fat men. And just as I passed below her I caught for a moment a strange glint leading into her back. A joylon-covered wire! Yes, Miss Glamo was but clever plastic plugged into a hole in the wall. —The tube swept us out past the symbol-wall and the stairs where the fish-lights played. And with the momentum we held we kept on going down. Until we again were on a wet street in the rain.

Glob Gloul the Gloul took up his blackout tube and I climbed into my walk-along muse ball, and we hurried back to our hole in the weed-clogged vacant lot. We stood silent beside the hole for a little moment, and then I said, "Well, what do you think?"

He crossed his hurt eyes at me, and the diaster one and the milky and sick one made strange stare; but he looked really at the sky where the jets swam, where the massed bombers roared at parade, where the long-target rockets and the 'Honest Johns' blew by. Then he said, eyeing me calmly with his two sick eyes that seemed to hook sharply toward the sun, "I think we have no clothes." With a start I remembered that the pink hands had not dressed us in Brown 4. "And I think we better dig," he continued, calm as a man going home to stroll for awhile on a lawn.

SO WE fell into our hole and dug for uncountable days, far past all the ledges and the bones; we dug until we hit the center of the earth. We lay there, knowing we'd come home as best we could, warm and snug in a little circle of fire—not eating, not drinking, not wanting to—wanting only to wait until we should hear the tremble of the whole wrong-tending earth. When we heard it, knowing that all was over, and nothing more to do, we went calmly to sleep in a pleasant circle of flame at the center of a black and lost dream. Upon waking we rose lightly, as spirit will, up the jagged walls of the hole we had dug, until we reached the black lips of it.



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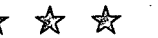
Nothing moved now across all that once gaudy earth that had worshipped mainly joylon and good times—nothing but black smoke going aloft as though it would never stop. He and I made little round mouths of I-told-you-so at each other for awhile in a kind of smug glee. Then we too went with the black smoke up through a hole in the black boiling sky. **THE END**



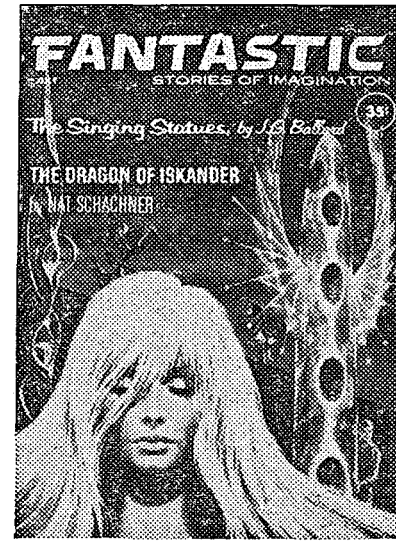
## COMING NEXT MONTH

**A collector's issue — that's what the July FANTASTIC promises to be. For example, it will include:**

1) *The Singing Statues,* a new story by **J. G. Ballard** that will become a classic of fantastic writing;

2) A tale by a master that has already become a classic — the famous *Dragon of Iskander,* by the late great **Nat Schachner;**

3) The conclusion of *Shield,* the novel by **Poul Anderson.** And, as if this were not enough, whatever other short stories and features we can shoehorn into the issue, plus all the usual departments.




**Run, do not walk, to your nearest newsstand to get the July issue of FANTASTIC, it will be on sale June 21.**



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# SHIELD

By POUL ANDERSON

*Thus it has always been: the genius and bravery of man brings the world a gift of knowledge—and other men seek to trample the gift in the dirt of their own selfishness. Thus it has always been. But does it always have to be?*

Illustrator ADKINS



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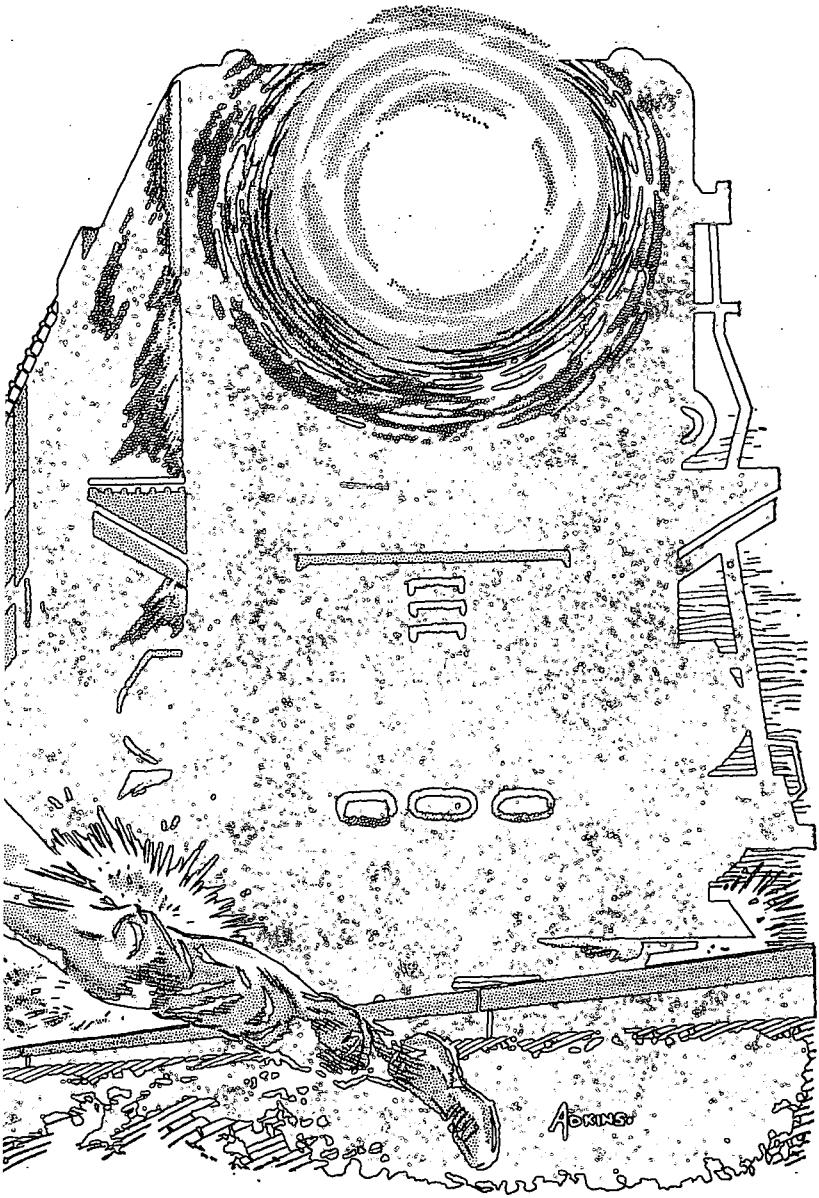




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FOR a moment, as he looked across megapolis, something like terror caught him. *What do I do now?*

Reddened by haze, the sun was dropping behind a Center, which bulked black against a sky where aircraft moved like glittering midges. The whole horizon was full of such unitized subcities and company towers. But closer at hand Koskinen saw how skyline was an illusion. The great buildings stood well apart, separated by a huddle of warehouses, factories, low-class tenements. Tubeways knit them together, curves which soared and gleamed in the last sunshine; but underneath lay a prosaic web of streets, belts, and monorails. In the early darkness below the walls, lights had already switched on, twinkling from ground-level windows, outdoor lamps, cars and trains. The silence in this room, a hundred stories up, made the spectacle unreal, a glimpse from a foreign planet.

Abruptly Koskinen turned the viewall off. The scene in it reverted to a random flow of pastel colors. He didn't play the records which a list offered him, not even the Hawaiian surf or the Parisian cabaret which had fascinated him this morning. *To hell with your shadow shows,* he thought. *I want something I can touch and taste and smell.*

*Like what? What do I want?*

There were the hotel's own facilities, garden, swimming pools, gym, theater, bars, restaurants, hostesses, almost anything he chose to buy or hire. He could afford first class, with five years' back pay in his kick. Then there was the supertown itself. Or he could catch a stratoship to a more western city, transfer to a local flyer, rent a flitter at the edge of a national park, and sleep this night beside a forest lake. Or—

*What?* he asked himself. *I can pay for whatever I like, except friends. And already—good Lord, I've been on my own less than twenty-four hours!—already I know how lonely it is to pay for everything.*

HE reached toward the phone. "Call me up," Dave Abrams had said. "Here's the number. Our place always has room for one more, and Manhattan's a good spot for a pub crawl. At least, it was five years ago. And I'm sure I can still guarantee my mother's cheese blintzes."

Koskinen let his hand fall. Not yet. Abrams' family would want time and privacy, to get to know their son. Half a decade must have changed him. The government representative who met the crew at Goddard Field had remarked how quiet they were, as if the quietness of Mars had en-



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tered them. Also, Koskinen realized wryly, pride held him back. He wasn't going to holler, "Hey, please cuddle me, I haven't got any playmates"—not after his boasts about the swathe he planned to cut through the fleshpots of Earth.

Similarly for his other shipmates. But they did all possess an advantage over him. They were older, and had backgrounds to come home to. There were even a couple of marriages that had withstood so long a separation. Peter Koskinen had nobody. The fallout during the war missed the tiny resort town in northern Minnesota where he was a child, but the subsequent epidemics did not. The Institute picked the eight-year-old survivor out of an orphanage and raised him with several thousand others who scored equally well on IQ. It was rough. Not that the school was harsh—they did their best to supply parental surrogates—but the country needed a lot of trained minds and needed them in one tearing hurry. Koskinen took a master's degree in physics with a minor in symbolics at the age of eighteen. That same year the Astronautics Authority accepted his application for the ninth Mars expedition, the one which would stay long enough to learn something about the Martians, and he shipped out.

He straightened. *I refuse to feel sorry for myself,* he decided. *I am twenty-three years old, in excellent health, with a substantial bank account. In a few more days, when I make my official report to the board, I'm going to blow the lid off space technology and get myself a niche in the history books. Meanwhile nothing ails me except that I'm not used to Earth yet. You can't spend some of your most impressionable years on another world, so different it's like a dream, and instantly become just like six billion Earthlings.*

*What I need, now, tonight, is several stiff drinks, a damn good dinner shared with the hotel's slinkiest hostess, and romantic music on the taper when we come back here for more drinks and—uh*—His heart began knocking thickly. He had no experience worth mentioning with alcohol, or women, or haute cuisine.

ALWAYS a first time, lad," he said half aloud, and went into the bath cubby to check his appearance. The high-collared red blouse, flowing blue pants, and soft shoes he had bought today were, he had been assured, in fashion. He wondered whether to depple his short blond beard, but decided not to: he was rather baby-faced without it, snub nose, high cheekbones, oblique blue eyes. His body was muscular;



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Captain Twain had insisted the gang exercise regularly, and lugging a hundred Earth-pounds of survival equipment around was no picnic either. Koskinen had been surprised at how readily he re-adapted to home gravity. The thick, dusty, humid air and late summer temperature were harder on him than weight.

*I guess I'll do,* he told himself anxiously, and started toward the main door.

It chimed.

For a startled instant, Koskinen didn't move. Who—? Someone off the ship, he wondered with quick hopefulness, as much at loose ends as himself? He remembered to look at the scanner. But the screen was blank.

Out of order? The chime sounded again. Koskinen pressed the Unlock button.

The door opened and two men stepped through. One of them thumbed the Lock switch as the door closed again. His other hand manipulated a small flat box. The scanner came back to life with a view of an empty glideway outside. The man dropped the jamming box into his blouse pocket. His companion had moved along the wall until he commanded a view of the cubby.

Koskinen stood motionless, bewildered. They were bulky men, he saw, soberly clad, their faces hard but almost without expression. "Hey," he began, "what's this about?" His voice trailed off, as if rubbery floor and soundproof panels absorbed it.

The man by the cubby snapped, "Are you Peter J. Koskinen, from the USAAS *Boas?*"

"Y-yes. But—"

"We're from Military Security." The man pulled forth a wallet and flipped it open. Koskinen looked at the identification card, from the photograph back to the features, and his body tensed.

"What's the matter?" he asked, shakily, for even an innocent fresh off the boat knew that MS wasn't called in to solve mere crimes. "I—"

The man put away his wallet. Koskinen had seen the name Sawyer. The one by the door remained anonymous. "Our bureau's gotten a report about you and your work on Mars," Sawyer said. His eyes, bullet colored, never left Koskinen's. "First tell me, though, you got any appointments tonight? Going to meet anybody?"

"No. No, I—"

"Good. We'll be checking all your statements, remember, by psychointerrogation among other things. Better not lie to us."

KOSKINEN backed a step. He lifted hands gone wet and cold. "What's the matter?" he whispered. "Am I under arrest? What for?"



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"Let's call it protective custody," said Sawyer in a slightly more amiable tone. "Technical arrest, yes, but just a technicality as long as you cooperate."

"But what've I *done?*" Sudden anger jumped up in Koskinen. "You can't quiz me under drugs," he exclaimed. "I know my rights."

"The Supreme Court ruled three years ago, chum, that in cases involving the national security, PI methods are allowable. The evidence can't be used in court—yet—It's only to make sure—" Sawyer almost pounced. "Where's the gizmo?"

"The what?" Koskinen began to tremble.

"The gadget. The shielding machine. You took it off the *Boas* with your luggage. Where is it?"

*Damn near was my luggage,* a distant, crazily humorous part of Koskinen thought. *You don't carry much in the way of personal effects on a spaceship.* "What-what-what do you want with it?" he heard himself stammer. "I never . . . stole. . . . I only wanted it handy for when I, I make my report—"

"Nobody's called you a thief," said the man by the door. "It simply happens that gadget is important to security. Who else knows about it, besides the other expedition members?"

"No one." Koskinen moistened his lips. The horror began to ebb a little. "I've got it . . . right here. In this room."

"Good. Break it out."

Koskinen shambled to the cabinet and pressed the button. The wall slid back, revealing a few changes of clothes, a rain poncho, and a parcel about three feet by two by one, wrapped in yesterday's picture paper and tied with string. "There," he pointed. His finger shook.

"Is that the whole works?" Sawyer asked suspiciously.

"It's not big. I'll show you." Koskinen squatted to untie the package. Sawyer clapped a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back.

"No, you don't! Keep away from that!"

Koskinen tried to swallow the rage that returned in him. He was a free American citizen who had deserved well of his country. Who did these flatfeet think they were?

*MS, that's who.* The knowledge was chilling. Not that he had ever had much to do with them before, or had heard them accused of unnecessary ill-usage. But one spoke about them softly.

SAWYER made a quick, expert check around the room. "Nothing else," he nodded. "Okay, Koskinen, check out of here and we'll be on our way."

He started throwing clothes into the suitcase which had also



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been acquired today. Koskinen went jerkily to the phone, rang the desk, and mumbled about an emergency that forced him to leave. He signed and thumbprinted a check; the clerk recorded a facsimile down below and asked if he wanted a bellboy. "No, thanks." Koskinen switched off and looked into the anonymous agent's face. "How long will I be gone?" he pleaded.

The agent shrugged. "I only work here. Let's go."

Koskinen carried his own bag, Sawyer had the package, the third man stood on the other side with a hand resting negligently in one pocket. The glideway carried them down the corridor. At the third branch they took an upward belt, straight to the roofport. A young man and a girl descended on the opposite strip. Her tunic was a wisp of iridescence from bosom to knees, her hair was piled high and sprayed with micalite, her laugh seemed to come from across immense distances. Koskinen had not felt so alone since he stood hearing pine trees in the night wind and saw his mother die.

Nonsense, nonsense, he told himself. Everything was under control. That was what the Protectorate was for, to keep things under control, to keep cities from going up in radioactive smoke again, and Military Security was no more than the intelligence agency of the Protectorate. Now that he thought about it, the potential barrier effect did have warlike possibilities. Though not for aggressive war. Or did it? Maybe the Security people—good Lord, perhaps Marcus himself—wanted no more than to be reassured on that point.

Yet he was being hustled along by Sawyer's impatient grip on his elbow, and the other man must have a gun in that pocket, and they were going to take him somewhere, incommunicado, and fill him with mind drugs. . . . Suddenly, blindingly, he wished he were back on Mars.

On the edge of Trivium Charontis, looking across the Elysian desert, where the small brilliant sun spilled light from a sky like purple glass, a universe of light, floored with red and tawny dunes, on to the horizon where a dust storm walked crowned with ice crystals; a stone tower which was old when Earthlings hunted mammoths; Elkor's huge form coming from behind, scarcely to be heard rustling in that thin sharp air; the palp laid on Koskinen's neck, so strong he felt the detailed touch through his thermsuit fabric, yet gentle as a woman's hand, and the coded vibrations that could by now be understood as readily as English, sensed through flesh and bone: "Sharer-of-Hopes, there came to me,



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while I merged myself with the stars last night, a new aspect of reality which may bear on the problem that gives us mutual joy."

THEN the three men were stepping from the kiosk onto the roof. An ordinary-looking aircar balanced a little ways from those which were simply parked. Sawyer nodded to the attendant, who seemed intimidated, and slid back the door. "In," he said. Koskinen entered the plastic teardrop and sat down in the middle of the front seat. The agents flanked him, Sawyer at the manual controls. They fastened their safety belts. The light on the radar post turned green. Sawyer pushed the stick and the car shot upward.

The sun was down and low-level megapolis was quite benighted, strung with electric jewels further than Koskinen could see—from Boston, Massachusetts, to Norfolk, Virginia, he recalled vaguely, and eastward to Pittsburgh, where it extended a tendril to meet the complex derived from Chicago. Skyscrapers and Centers reared above that hazy dusk, their heights still catching daylight. The western sky arched greenish over the sunset embers. He recognized Venus and two crawling sparks that were relay satellites. There were more aircars than he remembered from boyhood, darting on a score of traffic levels. Material prosperity was on the way back at last, he thought. A transcontinental liner slanted huge and silvery across the lanes, bound for Long Island seadrome. He watched it with longing.

Sawyer set the autopilot and punched for Washington. The car was assigned a medium level, which it entered when the liner was safely past. Sawyer took out a pack of cigarets. "Smoke?" he invited Koskinen.

"No, thanks." With an idiotic need to talk, say anything, as long as the humming silence in the vehicle could be held off: "We couldn't on Mars, you see."

"Oh, yes. When your oxygen had to be recycled—"

"No, weight and space was what ruled out tobacco," Koskinen said. "Oxygen was no problem. Not toward the end, at least. With what we'd learned from the Martians—together with them, I should say—we, uh, we developed an air reclaimer the size of your fist, with capacity enough for two men at top metabolic rate. I, uh, I've included one in the shield unit. Naturally, when I was traveling around on the surface of Mars, using the potential field instead of a thermsuit and helmet."

"Cut that!" Sawyer barked. "I shouldn't hear any more."



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"But you're Security," Koskinen said in astonishment.

"I'm not the boss man," Sawyer said, "and I don't want them to wipe my brain of what I'm not supposed to know. Too damn often, you lose more memories than they figured on."

"Shut up," said his companion. Sawyer showed a second's alarm, then clamped his lips. Koskinen sagged back. *Would they erase memories in me?* he thought sickly.

THE companion turned around and stared through the rear window. "How long's that car been behind us?" he snapped.

Sawyer looked too. Koskinen couldn't help doing the same, though he saw nothing but a vehicle at the standard medium-speed distance, not noticeably different from those which moved parallel on either side. "I dunno," Sawyer said. Dryly: "We're not the only ones going to Washington."

The other man took a spyscope from the glove compartment and peered through it. "Yeh," he grunted. "Same car as followed us from Jersey. I paid attention."

"There're a lot of blue 2012 Eisenhowers," Sawyer said.

"I noticed the license number too," the other man snorted. "You better go back to the Academy."

"But—" Sweat sprang forth in tiny beads on Sawyer's cheeks.

"Now how much of a coincidence is it that a car which happened to get right at our rear on the way to Philly then happened to leave the traffic pattern when we did, then happened to hang around in the streets for precisely as long as we were in the Hotel Von Braun, and then by sheer chance headed off for Washington at the same moment as us?" The man spoke angrily. "And no closed circuit com in this heap to call HQ! Somebody's head will roll."

"We got our orders in such a hurry," Sawyer argued. "Maybe that's an escort there. Yeah, sure. A shadow wouldn't be that amateurish. HQ doesn't always tell you when you're going to be escorted."

"If there was time to arrange an escort, there was time to find us an armored car with a closed talkie circuit," the other man said. "That guy's a foreigner. What do we do about him?"

Sawyer touched the phone. "Call the regular police," he suggested. "Or HQ itself."

"And let half the continent know something big's going on? Not till the situation gets worse than this." The man leaned over Koskinen and punched the pilot board. The telltale screen lit up with REQUEST MAXIMUM CIVILIAN SPEED FOR THIS ROUTE.



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"What's happening?" Koskinen managed to breathe.

"Don't worry, kid," said the agent. "When Control yanks us into the top lane, those birds'll have to wait—about three minutes, I'd guess, at this traffic density—for the next opening. That's thirty miles and a lot of other cars put between us."

"But—but—"

Sawyer had regained composure. "This is the sort of thing we're trying to protect you against," he said, not unkindly. "How long do you think you'd live if the Chinese got their hooks on you?"

"Oh, he might live quite a while," said the other agent, "but he wouldn't enjoy it much. Whoops, here we go!"

SOMEWHERE down in the night, the Control computer identified a break through which a car could safely rise. The warning bell rang and Koskinen was pressed back against his seat cushions. Riding lights were switching on at this twilit moment, so that he fell upward through a sudden blurred galaxy of red and green suns. Then they were beneath him, part of the jewels strung over megapolis. The overhead canopy showed him a sky still dusky blue, the first stars blinking forth, no trace of man except the satellites and one remote stratoliner.

The car levelled off. "Whew!" Sawyer rubbed the back of a hand across his forehead. "I'm glad to get out of there, I can tell you!"

"But what could they have done?" Koskinen blurted. "I mean, under Control—unless they, uh, had an illegal override circuit—"

"So do we, except for us it's authorized," the other agent grunted. "I can't see a dogfight down in the crowded lanes, no. Especially since the cops'd be there in two minutes. But those boys aren't playing for candy. There are stunts they could have tried."

Sawyer relaxed a little. "The main drawback to this lane is, we might be stacked up above Washington, waiting for clearance to land, longer than it'd take us to get there at average speed. How about ducking down again pretty soon?"

"Uh-huh. Not that I expect—"

Koskinen, looking at the stars and wondering horribly whether he would see them again, was the first to spy the stratoship. "What's that?" he called. The two agents jumped in their seat.

The craft struck downward, a great black bullet, unlighted, exhaust nearly invisible. Koskinen's ears, used to thin air, heard the wail as it drew close. The car rocked.

"Judas!" Sawyer exploded.



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*"Military!"* He flung open a panel and pulled a switch. Override, Koskinen thought wildly; escape from the rigid course and speed set by Control—

The armored hull loomed monstrous in the canopy. The aircar leaned over and powerdove groundward. Traffic scattered on each side as Control tried to compensate. Across delirium Koskinen saw Control's failure. Two pairs of red-and-green lights wobbled together, merged, went out, and a meteor trailed fire and smoke down into darkness.

"Hang on!" the nameless man shouted. "The cops'll be coming!" Then the safety belt dug into Koskinen's stomach. His head, thrown forward, almost struck the instrument board. The crash rattled his teeth.

"Grapple!" he heard Sawyer yell. "They got a satellite recovery grapple on us!" Through the canopy, Koskinen glimpsed lines drawn taut. The car tilted crazily. The fleeting lights fell away again. They were bound up.

SAWYER slammed the phone buttons. There was no response. "They've jammed our transmission," he groaned. He leaned on the main drive switch till the engine roared and vibration nearly shook the car apart. "No use. We can't bust that mesh. Any chance the cops can intercept?"

"Not yonder baby," his companion said through clenched jaws. "Even lugging us, it can outrun any police car ever built. But if the Air Force gets the word in time to scramble a pursuit squadron, we might get rescued yet."

Through the creakings and shakings, Koskinen began to hear a low whistle. Outside he saw blue-blackness and the sun again on the western horizon. They must be entering the stratosphere. And a leak had been opened in the abused chassis. He felt his eardrums pop as pressure diminished.

"That car shadowing us did have a closed com circuit," said the unidentified agent slowly. "They were in constant touch with the stratoship. It dawdled at extreme altitude, beyond range of Control's radars. Must've taken off in the first place from somewhere in America, or Continental Defense would've spotted it. That's why they were so obvious about tailing us. They figured we'd do exactly what we did, rise high enough to be snatched from above. So they're Chinese. Nobody else has that kind of organization or that much brains."

Both men had guns in their hands. "Wh-what can we do?" Koskinen faltered. Breath grew scant; a cold draft struck his ankles.



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"Break out the oxygen masks and fight," Sawyer said. "We've still got a chance. Us hanging in a grapple net from their belly slows 'em down. The cops must already have alerted MS. Con Defense radar's going to lock onto them inside of ten minutes. A pursuit squadron will overhaul 'em in ten minutes more."

"They must realize that too," said the other man. His eyes never left the canopy, where the whale shape gleamed through the mesh, edged with night and stars.

The car jerked. A square of deeper blackness opened in the hull above—no, there were lights —"They're taking us aboard!" Sawyer gasped.

His companion sat rigid, hardly seeming alive except for the blood that trickled from his nose. "Yeah," he said. "I was afraid of that."

His gun swung about. Koskinen looked down the muzzle. "I'm sorry, kid," the agent murmured.

"What do you mean?" a stranger cried through Koskinen's head.

"We can't let them have you. Not if you're as important as I gather you are."

*"No!"*

"Goodbye, kid."

IT was not Koskinen's will which responded. That would have been too slow. But he had practiced judo on Mars for fun and exercise. The animal of him took over the learned reflexes.

He had twisted around in the seat to face the agent. His left hand batted out, knocked the gun aside. It went off with a hiss, startlingly loud beside Koskinen's ear. His right fist was already rocketing upward. It struck beneath the nose. The agent's face seemed to disintegrate.

Koskinen snapped his skull backward. It banged against Sawyer's chin. The man barked. Koskinen reached over his shoulder, got Sawyer by the neck, and hauled the agent's larynx across his collarbone. He bore down, brutally. Already oxygen starved, Sawyer made a choking noise and went limp.

Koskinen sagged. Blackness whirled and buzzed around him. A quiver through the car stabbed awareness back into his brain. The hatch was just above the canopy now, like an open mouth. He glimpsed a man on the edge of it, thermsuited, airhelmeted, and armed with a rifle. The car would be in the ship's hold in one more minute. Then, unencumbered, the ship would have a chance of escaping to wherever it had come from.

Sawyer and the other agent stirred. For a fractional second, Koskinen thought: *My God,*



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*what am I doing? I attacked two MS men . . . I'm leaving them here to be captured—*

*But they meant to kill me. And I haven't time to help them.*

He had already, somehow, unbuckled his safety belt. He scrambled over the seatback. The parcel lay on the rear seat. He snatched it. His free hand fumbled with the door catch. The sound of air, whistling from the interior toward stratospheric thinness, filled his universe.

The car bumped over the hatch frame. Koskinen got the door unlocked. Swords rammed through his eardrums as he encountered the full pressure differential. The thermsuited man aimed the rifle at him.

He jumped from the open door, out through the hatch, and started falling.

*FIRST you protect your eyeballs. They can freeze.*

Koskinen buried his face in the crook of his left arm. Darkness enclosed him, weightlessness, and savage cold. His head whirled with pain and roarings. The last lean breath he had drawn in the car was still in his lungs, but clamoring to get out. If he gave way to that pressure, reflex would make him breathe in again. And there wasn't much air at this height, but there was enough that its chill would sear his pulmonary system.

Blind, awkward with a hand and a half available to him, aided only by a little space experience with free fall—very little, since the *Franz Boas* made the crossing at one-fourth gee of nuclear-powered acceleration—he tore the paper off his shield unit. He and it would have different terminal velocities, but as yet there was so tenuous an atmosphere that everything fell at the same rate. He fumbled the thing to him. Now . . . where was the damn right shoulder strap? . . . the unit was adjusted for one-man wear, and he couldn't make readjustments while tumbling through heaven—Panic snatched at him. He fought it down with a remnant of consciousness and went on groping.

There!

He slipped his arm through, put his head over against that biceps, and got his left arm into the opposite loop. The control panel flopped naturally across his chest. He felt about with fingers gone insensible until he found the master switch, and threw it. In one great gasp he breathed out and opened his eyes.

Cold smote like a knife.

He would have screamed, but his lungs were empty and he had just enough sense left not to try filling them. *Too high yet, too high*, he thought in his own disintegration. *Got to get further*



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*down. How long? Square root of twice the distance divided by gee —Gee, Elkor, I miss you, Sharer-of-Hopes, when you sink your personality into the stars these nights do you include the blue star Earth? No, it's winter now in your hemisphere, you're adream, hibernation, hiber, hyper, hyperspace, is the shield really a section of space folded through four extra dimensions, dimens, dim, dimmer, OUT!*

At the last moment of consciousness, he turned off the unit.

He was too numb to feel if there was any warmth around him. But there must be, for he could breathe again. Luckily his attitude wasn't prone, or the airstream pounding into his open mouth could have done real damage. He sucked greedily, several breaths, before he remembered to turn the field back on.

Then he had a short interval in which to fall. He saw the night sky above him, not the loneliness and wintry stars of the stratosphere, which reminded him so much of Mars, but Earth's wan sparks crisscrossed by aircar lights. The sky of the eastern American megapolis, at least; they lay below him still, though he had no idea what archaic city boundaries he had crossed. He didn't see the stratoship. Well, naturally. He'd taken the crew by surprise when he jumped, and by the time they reacted he was already too far down for them to dare give chase.

SUDDENLY he realized what he'd not stopped to think before—he *was* over a densely populated area. At his speed he was a bomb. *God,* he cried wildly, *or Existence, or whatever you are, don't let me kill anyone!*

The city rushed at him. It swallowed his view field. He struck.

To him it was like diving into thick tar. The potential barrier made a hollow shell around his body, and impact flung him forward with normal, shattering acceleration until he encountered that shell. Momentum carried him a fractional inch into it. Then his kinetic energy had been absorbed, taken up by the field itself and shunted to the power pack. As for the noise, none could penetrate the shield. He rebounded very gently, rose to his feet, shaky-kneed, stared into a cloud of dust and heard his own harsh breath and heartbeat.

The dust settled. He sobbed with relief. He'd hit a street—hadn't even clipped a building. There were no red human fragments around, only a crater in the pavement from which cracks radiated to the sidewalks. Fluoro lamps, set far apart, cast a dull glow on brick walls and un-



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lighted windows. A neon sign above a black, shut doorway spelled UNCLE'S PAWN SHOP.

"I got away," Koskinen said aloud, hardly daring to believe. His voice wobbled. "I'm free. I'm alive."

Two men came running around a corner. They were thin and shabbily dressed. Ground-level tenements were inhabited only by the poorest. They halted and gaped at the human figure and the ruined pavement. A bar of purulent light fell across one man's face. He began jabbering and gesturing, unheard by Koskinen.

*I must have made one bong of a racket when I hit. Now what do I do?*

*Get out of here. Till I've had a chance to think!*

He switched off the field. His first sensation was warmth. The air he had been breathing was what he had trapped at something like 20,000 feet. This was thick and dirty. A sinus pain jabbed through his head; he swallowed hard to equalize pressures. Sound engulfed him—machines pounding somewhere, a throb underfoot, the enormous rumble as a train went by not far away, the two men's shout, "Hey, what the hell, who the hell're you—?"

A woman's voice joined theirs. Koskinen spun and saw more slum dwellers pouring from alleys and doorways. A dozen, two dozen, excited, noisy, gleeful at any excitement in their gray lives. And he must be something to see, Koskinen realized. Not only because he'd come down hard enough to smash concrete. But he was in good, new, upper-level clothes. On his back he carried a lumpy metal cylinder; the harness included a plastic panel across his chest, with switches, knobs, and three meters. Like some science fiction hero on the 3D. For a second he wondered if he could get away with telling them a film was being shot, special effects and—No. He began to run.

SOMEONE clutched at him. He dodged and fled on past the crowd. A halloo rose from them. The shield unit dragged at his shoulders; ten pounds added up like fury when you were exhausted. He threw a glance behind. The street lamps marched in an endless double row, skeleton giants with burning heads, but so far apart the darkness welled around each one. The walls rose sheer on either side. A network of tubeways, freight belts, power lines shut out the sky above, except for a red glow. A train screeched around some corner. He could just see the men who pursued, just hear their yelps.

He pressed elbows against



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ribs and settled down to running. Surely he was in better shape than these starvelings. And with more to hope for, which also counted. What did they have to look forward to, when machines crowded them from their last jobs and population growth outpaced welfare services? A man couldn't fight, or even run very well, when the heart had been eroded out of him. Could he?

The street, intended for trucks, came to an intersection and looped above a monorail track. Koskinen heard a nearing wail in the iron. He sprinted into the shadow of the overpass, dodged among its pillars. The train came into sight and bore down on him behind a blinding headlamp. Koskinen sprang, stumbled on the rail, picked himself up, and got across an instant before the locomotive went by. It shook his bones with noise. Dust swirled grittily into his nostrils. He hugged a wall and remembered that he could have made himself invulnerable by throwing the shield switch. But then he'd be immobile too, unless the train knocked him aside. . . . It brawled on past. Behind the freight cars came the passenger section, sallow people glimpsed through dirty windows.

*But I meant to break my trail. I've got be out of view before the train is by me.* Koskinen groped his way along the wall. The oily wind of the train's passage buffeted him. He bumped into another column supporting the overpass and fumbled his way back onto the street. Quickly, then, he ran down its emptiness until an alley yawned on his left. He ducked into that.

THE train vanished. He crouched in darkness, but no mob came after him. Not seeing him, they must have given up. Their chase had been mostly from curiosity anyhow.

The alley opened on a courtyard enclosed by four crumbling tenements. Koskinen paused in its shadows to pant. Since there was nothing above the house roofs here except some power lines, he could see the sky—red haze, no stars—and the beautiful, arrogant heights of a Center, half a mile or so away, looming over these mean walls. Traffic hummed and rumbled everywhere around, but no life was to be seen except one gaunt cat.

*Wonder where I am? Could be anywhere between Boston and Washington, I suppose, depending on which direction the stratoship took while it had us netted.* Koskinen forced his pulse and respiration down toward normal. His legs were weak but his mind was clearing. This must be a bomb-drop district, hastily re-



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built after the war and never improved since, except for the Centers; and they were towns to themselves, of course, where nobody could afford to live who didn't have the skills that an automation economy demanded. The deduction wasn't much help; there were a lot of bombsites.

What to do?

Call the police? But the police would get an alert about him from Military Security. And the MS men had tried to kill him.

Cold settled back into Koskinen. The fact couldn't be, he told himself frantically. Not in the United States of America! The country which mounted guard on a sullen world—self-appointed guardian at that; but who else could handle the job?—must be tough. Of course. But it didn't use agents who were murderers!

Or did it? Perhaps the emergency had been precisely that great. Perhaps, in some way he couldn't guess, the survival of the United States depended on Peter Koskinen not falling into foreign hands. If so, he need only report to MS. They'd apologize for everything, and give him the best of care, and release him when—

Well, when?

*Dad and Mother are dead,* he choked, *and Mars is lost behind this filthy sky. Who have I got?*

He remembered Dave Abrams. It was like a thawing in him. Dave had been his closest buddy. Still was, by Existence. And a level-headed chap. And Dave's father was on the board of directors of General Atomics, which meant influence comparable to a US Senator's. Yes, that was the doctrine. Call Dave. Arrange a meeting somewhere. Work out what to do, and then do it, with powerful friends at his back.

Returning nerve brought Koskinen a consciousness of how hungry he was. And thirsty. As thirsty as the time his air humidifier failed on the expedition along Cerberus Canal . . . the time he and Elkor traveled to the Philosophers, whose very shape he could no longer quite recall. . . . That had been in the second Earth-year, hadn't it? Yes. The third year they'd achieved their breakthrough, as Martian and Terrestrial science, viewpoints, ways of thinking, fused into a concept of energy phenomena that was new to both planets. In the fourth year they worked out the engineering practice and built portable potential-barrier units for everyone on the *Boas.* But only this one had been brought home, what with weight restrictions and—Koskinen realized he was maundering. Lightheaded. Let's find an eatery. Praise luck, he had a well-filled wallet in his pants.



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CROSSING the courtyard, he emerged on a more or less residential street. The neglected paving showed that few industrial vehicles used it. Brick and concrete buildings were jammed together, boxlike, none more than five stories high. A good many people were out on their balconies for a breath of air. Others drifted along the sidewalks: old shuffling men, tough-looking boys with hoods pulled over their brows and cigarets in their mouths, a gaggle of adolescent girls in sleazy ultrafashions that would have been more interesting if their figures had had a few more years to develop, a weary mother hauling a whining small fry home from a game in the street. More could be seen through their apartment windows, staring at the inevitable 3D screens.

Koskinen walked rapidly, making himself ignore the stares and mutters. A place to eat, a place to eat. . . . Around the next corner the local supermarket flashed neon at him.

Few were inside at this hour. He noticed how run-down and untidy the establishment was, but the prices marked were cheap . . . hm, yes, didn't the government subsidize low-level stores? Passing Drugs, Clothes, Laundry, and Tools, he saw a sign: RESTAURANT—animated, a bosomy girl dressed in exactly one apron, tossing flapjacks—beyond shelves of groceries, and cut through that section. The checkout robot couldn't identify the thing on his back. "One moment, please," said the tape. A buzzer sounded, a scanner lit up, and a human voice said from the mike, "Okay, go on. I don't know what the hell you got there, asco, but you didn't shoplift it here."

Koskinen grinned feebly and went on. The eatery wasn't an automat, he discovered with some surprise. Well, a degree of handicraft survived on the very poorest levels, where any pay was better than none—and among the wealthy, who could afford live service. A large man with sad eyes stood behind the counter; his belly sagged against it. Two other men nursed coffee cups at the farther end. They lacked even the nominal grooming of local residents: their blouses were stained and greasy, they hadn't deppled for a week. The big one watched the 3D in the corner, some idiotic story about a wartime mission across Australia. The other sat with a reefer between his fingers and stared at a private dream.

"What'll you have?" The sad man touched a button and today's menu appeared on a screen. Koskinen had visioned a huge rare steak with French fried onions. But what low-level joint would carry actual meat? He



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settled for a goomburger and alga stew. "And your biggest bottle of beer to start with," he added.

"Spiked?" asked the counterman.

"Hm?" Koskinen looked, puzzled, into the heavy face. "You mean vodka added?"

"What you talking about? I mean buzz juice. Mescalinoid, skizzo, neoin, or what do you want?"

"Uh, nothing. Just plain beer. I need a clear head tonight."

"Mmm . . . yeah. You're from topside, aren'tchu? Fancy clothes and a suntan. You'd better not get too happy at that, around here." The counterman took a liter of Raketenbräu from the cooler, opened it and set it before Koskinen. "In fact," he said, "my advice to you is, catch the first train back. Or better yet, phone for a taxi to come and fly you home."

KOSKINEN'S fingers clenched on the bottle. "Is this such a bad district?" he asked slowly.

"No-no. Not us natives, except for the boy packs. But we're not far from the Crater, and a lot of their people come over this way." The man made a furtive gesture toward the two who sat at the other end. The one who was not smoking had turned small eyes in a slashed and broken face away from the 3D and was looking openly, insolently, at the newcomer.

The counterman pushed a not very clean glass toward Koskinen. He used the opportunity to whisper: "We got guards in here, so we don't get any rough stuff. But you better not go out alone in the street. He guesses you've got money on you."

Koskinen shrugged. There was no reason why he should not leave by taxi. "Thanks for the warning," he said. He slipped the shield unit off his back and laid it under his stool.

"What is that thing, anyway?" asked the counterman aloud.

"Experimental," Koskinen said. The question was not pursued; people didn't get nosy on low-level. Koskinen drank deep. The cool taste tingled the whole way down. He attacked the food ravenously. Confidence flowed into him.

The man who had been watching him left the counter and went to a phone booth. Whoever he called didn't choose to transmit a picture. The man switched off and went back to his seat, where he joggled the marijuana dreamer awake. They muttered to each other. Koskinen paid no attention. He finished his meal and walked past them to the phone. Gifted with a good memory, he punched out the number Abrams had given him. The



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screen flashed: PLEASE DEPOSIT ONE DOLLAR FOR THREE MINUTES, TWO DOLLARS FOR VISUAL.

Why . . . that was the charge for a local call, wasn't it? Koskinen dropped in two coins and leaned out of the booth. "Hey," he called, "where am I, anyway?"

"Huh?" said the counterman.

"I'm, uh, I'm lost. What section is this?"

"Bronx." The counterman rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. The two others grinned. Koskinen closed the door as the screen came to life. He was too nervous to sit down, and threw a hasty glance at the telltale. But it wasn't glowing; no tape was being made at the other end of the line.

A plump, aging woman looked out at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she twisted a wedding ring around and around on her finger. "Is this Mrs. Abrams?" Koskinen asked. She nodded mutely. "May I speak to your son David, please?"

"He isn't here." Her voice was almost inaudible.

Oh, damn! "Do you know where I can get in touch with him? It's pretty urgent."

"No . . . no . . . who are you?"

"Pete Koskinen. Dave's shipmate—"

She jerked as if burned. "I don't know you!" she gasped. "I don't know anything about you."

"But—ma'am—" Koskinen's spine crawled. He forced calmness into his tone. "Is something wrong? Dave must have mentioned me. If you don't know where he is now, could you have him call me back?" He stopped and thought. "That is, I'll find a hotel room, then call and give you my number and—"

"No!" she screamed. "They arrested him! Don't you know they came and took him away?"

Koskinen stood unmoving.

She seemed to realize she had said too much. "You'd better get in touch with the police yourself," she chattered. "There's some awful misunderstanding, I'm certain it's a misunderstanding. Maybe you can help clear it up. Davy's father has been on the phone for hours, ever since—Calling everybody. Even people in Congress. But he can't learn a thing. Maybe you can help—" She began to cry.

*Is her line tapped?* Koskinen shoved down the switch.

BRIEFLY, he wanted to run. But that was senseless. He had no place to go. If a director of General Atomics couldn't spring his own son, what use—*I'll have one more try. Captain Twain himself.*

The skipper had gone to his home town in Oregon, Koskinen knew, even though he hadn't any close relatives left there. Kos-



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kinen dialled Information. "Please be patient, sir," the computer tech said. "A one-minute line break is due shortly."

What the devil? Oh, yes. The shifting configuration of the radio relay satellites. "I'll wait," Koskinen said.

"If your party isn't at home, do you wish a special search made?"

"N-no. Just find me where he's staying. I'll talk to anybody."

The screen blanked. Koskinen stood alone with the soft, silly "interlude music." He shifted from foot to foot, tugged his beard, hammered a fist into the other palm. Sweat trickled along his ribs.

There was a rap on the door. Koskinen turned about with an oath. The bristle-chinned man who had made the previous call stood outside. Koskinen flung the door open in a surge of belligerence. "Well?" he barked.

"Ya gonna be through soon, asco?" The tone was not impolite, but burly shoulders were hunched.

"A few minutes yet. There should be other phones in this place, if you're in a hurry."

"Nah, nah, that's okay. I was just wondering, sort of. We don't get many topsiders down here. I was wondering if you was looking for a little fun, maybe." The damaged face attempted a leer.

"No, thanks just the same."

"I know some good places. Better'n anything yuh find topside."

"No! I'm going to finish my call and get the devil out of here. Okay by you?"

Momentarily the man glared. Smoothing his expression, he nodded. "Don't getcha guts hot. I was just try'n'a be frien'ly." Koskinen closed the door. The other went back to the counter and spoke to his companion. Both looked pleased, Koskinen thought.

Some enormous time later, the phone buzzed. Koskinen whirled around so fast he bumped his knee on the seat. The pain stung him into a little more self-control. "We have your number, sir," a human operator said. "In Eugene, Oregon." He dropped in the required number of buck pieces.

THE screen showed him a strange man's face. "Is Captain Silas Twain there?" Koskinen asked.

"Who wants to know?" said the other. His manner was hard and wary.

Koskinen bristled. "Who the obscenity do you think you are?"

The man paused, reached a decision, and said: "Military Security. Captain Twain has been killed resisting a kidnap attempt. Who are you?"



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Koskinen shook his head, trying to clear the darkness out. "Is that the truth?" he mumbled. "Or another damned story?"

"Ask the news service. Now, who are you? Quick!"

"Just . . . an old friend. J-j-jim Longworth," Koskinen stammered, fishing a classmate's name from an impossibly remote past. "I heard the Mars expedition was back and—I thought—" Because the agent looked satisfied, he switched off.

Wildly, he stared out the booth. The big fellow who had spoken to him was now addressing the counterman. His mouth was drawn into an ugly grimace. The counterman flinched, shivered, nodded again and again, and tottered to the opposite end of the bar where he got furiously busy. The big man went out. The skinny one with the reefers remained, not smoking now, alert. It didn't register particularly on Koskinen.

Twain dead. Great, ruddy, unbendable Si Twain, a corpse. But such things didn't happen!

*Had MS killed him themselves?*

Koskinen slapped the switch up, punched for News, and fed coins into the slot. He scarcely saw or heard the answer girl. "Gimme the latest story on Captain Twain," he almost shrieked. "Mars expedition. They say he's dead tonight."

"Yes, sir. That story came in only half an hour ago. I remember personally." The girl punched buttons. A tape began to run, showing a man who said:

WORLD News Service, Eugene, Oregon, September 12. —Captain Silas G. Twain, 44, leader of the most recent expedition to Mars, was found murdered in his hotel room today. The body was discovered about 1630 Pacific Daylight Savings Time by Dorinda Joye, 22, a companion girl from an agency he had called not long before. There were many signs of a struggle. Beside Captain Twain's body, which had been shot, was that of a man believed to be Chinese. His skull was crushed by a heavy ashtray still in Twain's hand. Police theorized that several intruders had come in the tenth-floor window from an airlift platform and tried to kidnap the spaceman. While resisting he killed one of them. Unable to cope with him and fearing discovery, the others shot him and fled, Police Inspector John Flying Eagle said. The time of Twain's call to Miss Joye's agency fixed the hour of death as no earlier than 1600. Military Security agents moved promptly to occupy the scene and no further comment is being made by any official source.

"The reason for the tragedy remains a mystery. Twain was—"



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The commentary went into a hastily assembled obit, with film clips. Koskinen switched off. To hell with that.

To hell with MS, and the Chinese, and every other murdering —His eyes stung. *I'm about to cry,* he thought in a dim surprise.

*No use calling anyone else from the ship. I must be the only one still alive and at large, and that's only because I had the shield machine. Let's get out of here before I'm caught too.*

*Out? Where? I don't know. Right now I don't give a hoot. Just out.*

Clumsily, because he trembled and didn't see very well, he punched for a taxi. "Yes, the Old Prole Supermarket. How should I know the address? You've got a directory, haven't you? Use it, for God's sake!" He snapped the switch viciously and stumbled from the booth.

THE counterman shrank from him. Terror lay in the sallow features. Koskinen paid small heed. He hoisted the shield generator onto his back and went from the restaurant area.

A stocky man with a gun at his hip stopped him between grocery shelves. "'Scuse, mister," he said. "I'm a guard. Been watching you on the monitor. You know that bum who talked to you while you were phoning?"

"No," said Koskinen vaguely.

"Him and that other character, they're from the Crater. I've seen 'em around before. So they're up to no good. I don't like the way he talked to Gus at the bar. Plain as day, he told Gus not to warn you about nothing. And then he left his pal and went on out himself."

The reefer man drifted down another aisle, toward the door. The guard glowered after him. "I can't do nothing till they start acting roochy," he said. "But if I was you, mister, I'd stay here and let me call the cops. You might want an escort home."

Koskinen started. "Police?" *MS!* "Judas, no!"

The guard squinted. "You on the lam yourself, son? You don't look the sort. What's that thing you're wearing?"

"None of your business!" Koskinen yelled. He took off, nearly running. The guard stared a moment, then shrugged.

As the main door opened for him, Koskinen stopped. The truck lot outside was bare and dimly lit. Traffic growled, but not where he could see any. *I better stay inside till the taxi comes,* he thought.

And then where to? A hotel, probably. Not so cheap it was a robbers' den, not so good it would attract MS investigators. Or Chinese, he thought with a shudder. A middle class, traveling salesman sort of place. He couldn't



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stay there long, he was too conspicuous. But he could buy a happy pill, get a night's sleep—he was near falling over from weariness—and decide on his next move tomorrow.

A battered green teardrop rolled into the lot. The driver got out. He wore a steel helmet and an anesthetic needle gun, but his vehicle bore the legend COMETEER TAXICAB COMPANY. He strode briskly to the doorway. "You the party wanted a hack?"

"Yes." Koskinen followed him out. He opened the rear door with an unexpected flourish. Koskinen climbed in.

The door slammed on him. One powerful hand took his left wrist and twisted it agonizingly past the shoulderblades. Another arm closed around his throat. "Don't move none and you won't get hurt," said the voice of the man who had talked to him at the booth.

The driver chuckled and got into the front seat. He punched for air clearance and the taxi purred skyward. Koskinen fought to breathe.

FOOL, he told himself bitterly. Utter, total, thumblefumb idiot! The men at the counter had planned this from the minute they saw him. They'd called their confederate, on the reasonable guess that Koskinen would want to leave in a taxi. The conversation with him had confirmed that. The confederate had parked around the corner till the big man, the mugger, appeared and told him, "Push it, now; pick 'im up before the real cab gets here." The little marijuana smoker had kept an eye on Koskinen till the last moment, ready to dash out and warn the others if anything went wrong. But nothing had. He, Peter Koskinen, was caught.

"That's right," said the mugger. He laughed. "Just relax and enjoy it, like they say to the guils. We'll letchu off in a mile or so. Reach around with yuh right hand and toss yuh wallet on the floor."

Koskinen obeyed. *But I'm crippled now!* he thought. *I doubt if I've got twenty dollars in change. I daren't call my bank—*

"Okay," grunted the mugger. "He's been good, Tim. So land him near enough to a tube station he'll have a chance ah making it alive."

"X," said the driver, and punched again. Control lowered the taxi to street level and released it. They rolled to a halt between two sheer walls, automated plants no doubt, roofed by a rumbling freight belt. The gloom was thick here.

"Oh, yeh," said the mugger. "Yuh gimmick too. That thing on your back—jeez, did it ever get in my way just now!—I want



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that too. Dunno what it is, but mebbe Zigger will, or his guil. Wanna tell me yuhself?"

"No—please—" Koskinen croaked through the pressure.

"Suit yuhself. But get outta them straps. Pronto!"

The stranglehold was released so he could wriggle from the harness. The driver turned around and aimed the needle gun at him. Its metal gleam was barely discernible. "No tricks, now," he said genially.

*What have I got to lose?*

KOSKINEN slipped off his shoes, unnoticed in the murk. His hands pretended to tug at his shoulder straps. Groping, he felt the wallet through his socks, and picked it up between both feet.

"Snap along there," said the mugger impatiently.

Koskinen threw the shield switch.

The expanding cylindrical force shell pushed him off the seat until he occupied midair in a corner. The bandit was shoved against the opposite wall. He must have roared, and perhaps the driver cursed, but they were mere shadows now, altogether silent.

Koskinen put the wallet into his pocket and waited, shaking with reaction. He had become invulnerable to anything they had. Not even gas could penetrate the invisible barrier; and the air cycler guaranteed him oxygen. He saw fists batter. A needle broke on the shield, and the mugger opened his window to let the volatile anesthetic out.

"That's right," Koskinen babbled, crazily, since they couldn't hear him either. "You can't linger here. There are police cars on patrol, you know. You can't get at me. Shove me out the door and scram! You're whipped. Get rid of me!"

The big man felt around, defining for himself the volume of impenetrability. He threw his shoulder against Koskinen and found that the shell, with its contents, was easily movable; for it added no weight, and energy absorption provided a pseudo-friction. "Push me out and be done, you muckhead!" Koskinen shouted.

The two shadows conferred. The driver bent back to his controls. The taxi sprang into the air.

*Great Existence,* Koskinen thought. The knowledge clubbed him. *They're taking me along!*

There was sufficient light in the traffic lanes, diffused from below by the dirty air, that he could clearly see the mugger. The big man crouched against the further wall, his gaze never leaving Koskinen. He had the driver's gun in one hand and a vibro shiv in the other. His eyes were



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rimmed with white, his chest rose and fell, sweat glistened on his skin. But these bandits had guts, Koskinen knew—the courage to take this fearful thing where it could be studied and perhaps acquired.

*What to do?*

He could switch off the field long enough to open the door and jump . . . no. That would take a second, at least. A needle would need much less time to cross the car and knock him unconscious.

He could open his defenses and surrender.

No. Not yet. He could always do that, if things got desperate. Let him try to wait out their attempts. Maybe he could even bargain. Maybe, maybe—His strength collapsed. Folding himself as nearly into a sitting position as the shell allowed, he waited dully for whatever was going to happen.

IT wasn't far to the Crater. The taxi left the Control beam and slanted down on manual. Koskinen saw a circle of darkness, below and ahead, carved from the wan light-haze and street-web of the surrounding slum. He could make out a few buildings silhouetted on the rim, one or two windows aglow but otherwise black. Several miles away rose the Center he had seen while on foot, tier after tier climbing zenithward like a luminous fountain; and a couple of skyscrapers were also visible, where worldwide enterprises found housing. He could even see the firefly traffic stream yonder. It might as well all have been on another planet.

Not Mars, though, he thought in his despair. Mars had killed men too: with unbreathable ghostly atmosphere, hunger and thirst and cold and strangeness. But beauty had abided in those deserts, lichenoid forests, stark mesas—before everything else, in the great serene Martian minds, which had joined with humans to follow knowledge. *I used to get homesick out there for Earth. But what I missed, now that I think about it, was stuff like green grass and trees, sunlight on my bare skin, wind ruffling a lake, Indian summer, snow, and the people who belonged to such country, the people I knew as a kid. This isn't Earth. Wish me back to our Mars, Sharer-of Hopes.*

The taxi hovered near the unlit circle while the driver used his phone. Identifying himself? Rumor said that the more powerful chieftains in such places had means to shoot down intruders. Koskinen didn't know. Few upper-level civilians had any real information about the craters. Koskinen knew only that during the initial postwar reconstruction there'd been too much radioactivity at the bombsites for



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habitation. As it diminished, the poorest elements of society moved near because such land was cheap or even free. The hardiest went into the craters themselves, finding hideouts where they recruited their strength and from which, in time, they exacted tribute from the low-level dwellers of entire cities. The police, who had enough to do elsewhere, seldom interfered unless things got completely flagrant, and sometimes not then. Any social order was better than none, and the crater barons did impose a structure of sorts on the slums.

The driver switched off. A radio telltale glowed on his panel. He followed the beacon to a landing. Several shadowy forms closed in. The driver emerged and talked for a while. They opened the door and wrestled Koskinen out.

HE looked around. They were on a small concrete structure which jutted from the crater bowl about halfway between the rim and the invisible bottom. Its flat roof made a landing platform. Gloom sloped upward on every side, with the faintest vitrefaction shimmer, until it ended where a series of watchtowers squatted against the surly red haze. A glowlamp in one man's hand revealed half a dozen hard faces, helmeted heads and leather-like jackets, gun barrels aimed inward at the stranger. Two picked Koskinen up and bore him along; the others fanned out on guard. The mugger and the taxi driver went on ahead, while someone else was deputed to flit the vehicle away.

Koskinen lay passive in his shell, aching with tiredness. They carried him through a door at the bottom of the structure, down a ramp, and so into a plastic-lined, fluro-lit tunnel. A flatbed gocart stood there, onto which his escort got with him. It drove rapidly downward. Before many minutes the passage opened into a much larger tunnel, perhaps a subway which had survived the bomb blast and afterward had been refitted. They must have their own power system here, Koskinen thought, ventilation, heating, every necessity: including, no doubt, food and ammunition for a long siege. The gocart passed others, mostly carrying hired workmen who bobbed their heads respectfully to the warriors. It passed steel doors where machine gun emplacements were built into the walls, and finally stopped at an even more heavily fortified checkpoint. From there the party took a side passage, on foot.

But this was astonishing: a glideway hall, as elegantly decorated as the Von Braun's had been. An open door revealed a suite of darkly shining luxury



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and taste. Beyond, an intersecting corridor led them past less elaborate but perfectly adequate living quarters, then by a sprawling machine shop and a closed door which said ELECTRONICS—and eventually through a thick double portal into a concrete-block room where the guards set Koskinen down.

He got to his feet. That took a little doing; he must move his center of gravity about until he tilted the rigid force shell onto its broad flat "base." Glancing around, he saw the guardsmen place themselves along the walls, guns trained on him. A workbench held standard laboratory apparatus. Nearby were a telephone and the armored pickup of a monitor screen. *This is where they test anything dangerous,* he decides.

After what seemed a long time, the inner door opened again and let two people in. The guardsmen nodded in salute. Koskinen forced down the exhaustion that made his brain seem full of sand and looked closely at the newcomers.

The man was big, middle-aged, with a kettle belly and a bald pate. He scarcely even had eyebrows. His face was pink and jowly, a blob of a nose, a gash of a mouth. But he moved with a briskness that bespoke muscles. He was gorgeously clad in iridescent blue; rings glittered on his fingers. The spitgun at his hip looked well worn.

THE woman was pleasanter to watch. She was about thirty, Koskinen guessed, tall, a splendid figure and a supple gait. Blue-black hair fell almost to her shoulders. Her face was squarish, with lustrous brown eyes, broad nose, full and sullenly curved lips. Her complexion was a café-au-lait that made everyone else look bleached; the white lab coat she wore above an expensive red tunic heightened the effect.

*Okay,* Koskinen thought with a prickle along his scalp, *here's the boss in person. What'd the kidnappers call him, Zigger?*

The man walked slowly around him, felt the outlines of the field, pushed him over and studied how he fell and how he regained his feet. Waving his underlings out of ricochet range, he fired a few bullets and watched them drop straight down from the point where they struck. The woman leaned against the workbench and regarded the performance without stirring. At the end, she picked a notepad from among the apparatus, scribbled, and held the page before Koskinen's eyes.

He read, in an unexpected copperplate: "This looks like something we need. Are you interested in selling?"

He shook his head. "Let me go!" he cried.



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She frowned and wrote for him: "Make letters with your fingers. Deaf and dumb alphabet. So." She illustrated a few.

Deaf and dumb—? Oh, yes, such tricks doubtless did survive among those who couldn't afford neuroprosthesis. Koskinen spelled awkwardly out: "You cannot get at me and the police are looking for me. Better let me go."

The woman conferred with Zigger. He seemed shaken. She told him something that surprised him, but he gave orders to a guard, who went out. The woman wrote for Koskinen:

"Obviously you have air renewal in there, but I don't see any other supplies. You could be walled up and left to starve. Better come out and talk to us. Zigger keeps his word—when it's convenient." She threw the boss, who was reading over her shoulder, a hard grin; he reddened but made no comment. "He's a bad man to cross, though."

*Br'er Rabbit and the briar patch!* Koskinen thought in a leap of excitement. "Please do not brick me in," he spelled on his fingers. *If they do, I can expand the field and break down any masonry they can erect—and maybe escape!*

"Okay. Starving's too slow anyway," the woman answered laconically.

The guard returned with a bulky long-barreled object cradled in his arms. The woman wrote: "Do you recognize this?"

Koskinen shook his head. He couldn't see the thing very well.

"A maser gun. It amplifies radiation by stimulating atoms to re-emit in a highly collimated beam. Call it a heat ray."

*Oh, yes,* Koskinen thought. The will drained out of him. *I've heard about those.*

"I expect that since your force field or whatever it is lets light go back and forth, it will also let radio microwaves by," wrote the woman. "The first shot will be into your foot."

The guard brought the weapon to bear. Koskinen switched the shield off and fell forward on his hands and knees.

THE phone woke him. He turned over, shoved his head under the pillow, and tried to deny its existence. The phone kept buzzing. Koskinen blinked, mouthed a curse, reached out and switched it on.

A dark woman looked from the screen. He gaped, not easily remembering her or where he was. "Good morning," she said, with a smile that went no deeper than her lips. "Good afternoon, rather. *Late* afternoon. I thought you'd been sacked in long enough."

"Huh?" Slowly, in bits and pieces, recollection came back. He'd nearly fainted after the



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screen was off. They took the unit from him and led him here and gave him a tranquilizer—He looked around at a small, not unpleasant room with bath. There was only one door, and no window . . . a ventilator grille . . . yes, he was underground, wasn't he? In Zigger's inverted castle.

"I want to talk with you," the woman said. "I've ordered dinner." Her smile widened. "Breakfast, to you. The guard'll come fetch you in fifteen minutes. Up, fellah!"

Koskinen crawled from bed as the screen blanked. His clothes were gone, but a closet wall retracted to show several excellent new outfits. A needle spray forced some of the stiffness from his muscles. There was no logic to the fact that a green blouse and gray slacks should cheer him a little. By the time an armed man opened the door, he was ready and famished.

They took the glideway into the luxury section. He was waved through a door which closed behind him. Across a soft, tinted floor, he looked at a suite of several rooms. Some good pictures hung on the walls. The viewall was playing a color abstraction which was too intellectual for his taste, but he was gladdened to recognize Mozart on the taper. The furnishings were low-legged, Oriental, centered about a pedestal that upheld a lovely piece of uncut Lunar crystal. How much had that cost? he wondered.

The woman sat before a table. A white tunic set off her pale brown skin. She waved a hand with a cigaret in it. The other held a cocktail. "Sit down, Pete." Her voice was husky, with a trace of Southern accent. She was a quadroo, he guessed, and probably part Creole.

"How do you know my name?" he asked. Then: "Oh. Sure. Stupid of me. Papers in my wallet."

"And a quick check with the news service," she nodded. "You got one hell of a welcome home, didn't you?"

HE seated himself across the table. A servitor rolled in and asked him what he wanted. He realized that he and the woman were the only humans present —though doubtless the guard waited outside, and there might well be an alarm buzzer or a tattler mike in her massive silver bracelet. "I, I don't know," he said. "Uh . . . what was that thing the other day? . . . a Tom Collins."

She grimaced. "You need education, I see. Oh, well, it's your palate. Smoke?"

"No, thanks." He wet his lips. "Wh-wh-what did the news have to say about me?"

"Not one damn thing," she answered, looking straight into his eyes. "As far as the phone or the



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picture papers know, you're still relaxing at the Von Braun Hotel in Philly. However, we've not been able to contact any of your shipmates."

"I know," he said bleakly. "I only hope MS has them, alive. The Chinese killed Si Twain, you know."

"What?" She sat upright.

"It was on the news," he faltered. "Last night."

"It wasn't today," she said. "Today's story said he died in an accident and anything you heard about a murder was due to a hysterical—" The sensuous mouth grew as harsh as Zigger's. "What's the truth?"

He summoned defiance. "Why should I tell you?"

Her manner softened again, with the mercurialness that already bewildered him. "Look, Pete," she said, low and rapidly, "you're caught in something tremendous. I spent the day making empirical tests on that gadget of yours. I know a few things it can do, and that alone is enough to drive Zigger wild. We haven't any mind drugs here, but we do have nerve machines, and even uglier stuff. No—" she raised a slender hand—"I'm not threatening you. I wouldn't do such a thing to anybody, for any reason. But Zigger would. I'm warning you, Pete. You've had the course. There's no choice but to level with me, at least."

"If I do, what then? MS won't thank me."

"We can get you away from them, if you really don't think they will forgive you. The Crater does give value for value received, after its own fashion. Okay, what happeened to Twain?"

The servitor brought his drink. He snatched it and drank blindly. The account stumbled out of him.

She nodded, carefully, struck a fresh cigaret and puffed for a while with her eyes narrowed in thought. At length: "Yes, obviously last night's account was the right one, and now MS has clamped a lid on the truth. I begin to see the overall picture. Your expedition innocently brings this thing back from Mars, never dreaming what it implies. The men zoom off to their respective homes. They mention the thing to their friends. MS, which has been keeping tabs on them as it routinely does on everything unusual, gets the word within hours. *They* see the possibilities involved. They've got to lock away this machine and everyone who knows anything about it, at least until they can figure out what to do. So they take most of your shipmates into custody.

BUT the Chinese have spies of their own, agents, sleepers, scattered around the world. Ev-



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erybody knows that. And . . . the Chinese ring was probably on the *qui vive* about this returning expedition. After all, the previous trips had shown the Martians to have a considerable technology, even if it is utterly unlike anything we've imagined on Earth. The *Boas* might well bring back something revolutionary. Especially since your announced purpose was to make an intensive study of the Martian civilization. The Chinese could have worked agents into strategic positions far in advance. You know, people who become close friends of the spacemen's families, that sort of thing. So they got the word almost as soon as MS did. It became a race to capture expedition members."

Enfeebled as he was from sleep following total nervous exhaustion, and empty stomached, the liquor hit Koskinen like a fist. "Not much use," he blurted through a sudden fog. "I had the only unit on Earth. And the only full knowledge about it. Y' see, I was the one who developed it. With Martian help, certainly. But the other guys, they, uh, they had their own projects."

She leaned back on the couch, relaxing like a big cat, giving him only the softest of nudges. "Why didn't MS grab you before anyone else, then?"

"Prob'ly didn' get the full story at once. And maybe had some trouble finding me. I'd said I was going to Minneapolis, but at the last minute changed my mind, thought I'd look over the Atlantic supertown. They came fast, anyhow. With the Chinese on their heels."

"I take it you were escaping from the Chinese when our boys came upon you?"

"And MS. Also MS." Koskinen finished his drink. "Tried t' kill me, MS did." She opened her eyes wide and let them glow at him. He felt he must make himself clear to her, and went through the story.

"I see," she murmured at the end. "Yes, they're a hardboiled outfit in their own right. How well I know." She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "But you need food now."

The servitor brought in soup, rolls, authentic butter. She let him eat a while before she chuckled and said, "By the way, I forgot you still don't know my name. I'm Vivienne Cordeiro."

"Pleased to meet you," he mumbled. As his head cleared and strength returned, so did wariness. He cursed himself for giving away so many potential trump cards. Though he must admit she had helped him understand a situation that had seemed a fever dream. "Are you a physicist?"

"Of sorts," she nodded. "Institute kid like you—according to



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your news biography. They didn't pick me up, however, till I was *fifteen.*" A darkness flitted across her face. "A good many things had happened before then. But no matter now. I run the technical section here. Crater bosses also need someone who understands things like energetics and information theory." The smooth shoulders shrugged. "Of course, it isn't a full-time job."

"Uh . . . you and Zigger . . . that is—No, I'm sorry, forget it."

She nodded. "When he isn't interested in somebody else. He prefers them in their teens, really." She struck yet another cigaret and made a harsh gesture at the servitor. "Clear away this junk and let's have the salad."

HOT-EARED, Koskinen said in haste: "You realize, the shield unit is still in an early, experimental stage. You'd need a big laboratory and several years to develop the potentialities. Especially the potentialities that no one has yet guessed."

"True. But Zigger could make excellent use of the thing even as is. Let's talk about it. Not in any detail—I doubt if I could follow the math—but in generalities." Koskinen hesitated. "I already know a good bit," she reminded him.

He sighed. "Okay."

The salad came. It was delicious. He said so. She colored and long lashes fluttered to her cheeks. "Thanks. I made the dressing myself. Got a little herb garden under a sunlamp." Again impersonal: "Is this a Martian machine?"

"Not exactly. I told you the Martians and—well, me—invented it together. They had the field theory but didn't know much practical solid state physics."

"Hm-hm. That means MS can't simply send a spaceship there and demand the full plans. According to all previous reports, the Martians won't play ball with anyone who isn't *simpático* with the humans they've decided to like; and it's no use trying to pretend you are if you aren't, because they know; and the Russians found out the hard way before the war that they can detonate your atomic weapons in your own magazines. Of course, with the American government having the only spaceships these days, nobody else can get to Mars either. This game will be played out here on Earth.

"So what is your invisible screen? A potential barrier?"

Surprised, he nodded. "How did you guess?"

"Seemed reasonable. A two-way potential barrier, I suppose, analogous to a mountain ridge between the user and the rest of the world. But I've measured myself, today, that it builds from



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zero to maximum within the space of a few centimeters. Nothing gets through which hasn't the needful energy, sort of like the escape velocity needed to get off a planet. So a bullet which hits the screen can't get through, and falls to the ground. But what happens to the kinetic energy?"

"The field absorbs it," he said, "and stores it in the power pack from which the field is generated in the first place. If a bullet did travel fast enough to penetrate, it'd get back its speed as it passed through the inner half of the barrier. The field would push it, so to speak, drawing energy from the pack to do so. But penetration velocity for the unit I've got, at its present adjustment, is about fifteen miles per second."

She whistled. "Is that the limit?"

"No. You can push the potential barrier as high as you like, until you even exclude electromagnetic radiation. That would take a much larger energy storage capacity, of course. For a given capacity, such as my unit has, you can expand the surface of the barrier at the price of lowering its height. For instance, you could enclose an entire house in a sphere centered on my unit, but penetration velocity would be correspondingly less—maybe only one mile a second, though I'd have to calculate it out to be certain."

ONE mile a second is still plenty," she said, impressed. "How is the energy stored?"

"Quantum degeneracy. The molecules of the accumulator are squeezed into low states. The, uh, pressure is maintained by a regenerative sub-field within the accumulator, which is, however, responsive to momentum transfer through the main barrier shell."

"You've just revised the entire concept of energy storage, you know," she said absently, "killed a dozen major industries and brought twenty new ones into existence. But as for the field, or screen, or shield, or whatever name you prefer—what is it? A region of warped space?"

"You can call it that if you want to, though strictly speaking, 'warped space' is a tautology at best, a meaningless noise at worst. I could show you the math —" Koskinen stopped short. He oughtn't. Not to this gang of criminals!

She relieved him by sighing: "I'd never understand. What little I ever knew about tensors has rusted away long ago. Let's keep this practical. I noticed today that you have a thermostatic unit built into the apparatus. You'd need it, obviously, since air can't get in or out of the screen. And you have some kind of oxygen recycler like nothing I ever saw."

"That's mostly derived from



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Martian technology," he admitted. "Exhaled carbon dioxide and water vapor circulate over a catalytic metal sponge surface which bleeds a little energy from the accumulator for a chemical process. Except for the small equilibrium concentration that your body needs, they're formed into solid carbohydrate and free oxygen. Trace exhalations like acetone—stinks—get converted to radicals attached to the carbohydrate.

"On Mars we included a unit that took care of organic wastes as well and reclaimed all excreted water. So then you only needed to take food along, and you could stay out on a field trip for weeks. But it was a heavy thing, that unit, and the principle was elementary, so we left it behind."

"I see," Vivienne nodded. "How could you work, though, immobilized inside a barrier field?"

"We traveled on flatbed wagons or Martian sandsleds, drawn in a train by the electric tractors we'd taken along. Remote control robots did most of the actual specimen gathering. Toward the end, though, our engineers built a few—uh—we called them walkies. One-man platforms with legs and hands, waldo controlled by the rider, who could then go just about anywhere. In case of trouble, the shield could be expanded to enclose the machine and man.

"Of course," Koskinen added thoughtfully, "it was a makeshift. There's no reason why a shield can't be designed that'd fit a man like a thermsuit, only better, so he could walk and manipulate directly. It'd be a question of using a good many small generators, each responsive to the wearer's posture and motion. The total field at any instant would be the vector sum of the separate fields. However, that'll take a lot of engineering to do."

THAT'S not the only possibility," she said with rising excitement. "Spaceships, aircraft, even ground cars that haven't any hulls; just a potential shell generated when you need it. Vary the shape—turn your spaceship into your dome house—start really exploiting the minerals in the asteroid belt! A new kind of motor: push your ship forward by changing its energy potential—why, you might be able to travel near the speed of light. If a faster-than-light drive isn't lurking somewhere in your spacewarp equations. A new way to get atomic energy, I'll bet; if you can hold the molecule in a degenerate state, you should be able to do the same for the nucleus. Perhaps you'll be able to convert any kind of matter into energy. No more fuel costs, no limit to the available power! Your shield is only the beginning!"



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He remembered where he was, jarringly, and said with returning grimness: "It may be the end, with so many factions snatching after this thing."

The light died in her. She leaned back. "Yes," she said in a flat voice. "That's very possible. Virtual invulnerability . . . yes, people have ripped each other apart for lesser prizes, haven't they?"

The servitor brought in a roast turkey with trimmings. Vivienne shook herself, as if she were cold. She flashed Koskinen a quick white smile. "I'm sorry, Pete," she said. "I didn't mean to talk shop so soon. Let's forget it for a while. I'd like to get acquainted with you as a person." Her voice dropped. "Your kind of guy isn't too common these days. Not anywhere in the world."

They talked till far into the night.

THE guard who escorted him waved Koskinen through the double door. The echoing concrete bleakness of the laboratory brought his isolation sharply back. Zigger and Vivienne were already there. The boss was asking her:

"You sure he didn't say nothing to you? Ever? Like maybe he was running a little show of his own in low-level somewhere, that he could of ducked out to take care of?"

Her mouth curled. "Don't be more moronic than you have to, Zigger. How could a hophead like Bones run anything except errands?"

"He's not any hophead. Only pot."

"He's addicted to brain stimulation, isn't he?"

"That's not dope."

"I say it is."

Zigger lifted a hand as if to cuff her. She faced him rigidly. "How do you expect to locate Bones—that way?" she asked. He let the hand fall, turned about with a growl, and saw the newcomers.

"Argh! There you are!" The browless eyes glittered close to Koskinen. "C'mere. Grab him, Buck." One of the three guards present seized Koskinen's arms from behind. The trip was painful. Koskinen might have managed to break loose and get revenge, but the other two, and their master, had guns.

Zigger took a pair of channel pliers off the workbench. "I want you to understand something, Pete," he said, almost conversationally. "You've been caught. Nobody outside the Crater has any notion where you are. You're property. My property. I can do any mucking thing I feel like with you, and there won't be one damn thing you can do about it." The pliers closed on Koskinen's nose. "I can haul your beezer out



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by the roots, right now, this minute, if I want to." The jaws tightened, until tears were stung from Koskinen's eyes. Zigger grinned voluptuously. "You got worse places than that to get squeezed," he said. "Or if I don't want to do any harm, I'll hook you into a nerve machine. That hurts maybe more. I've watched guys in it. When we're finished with you, we'll run you through the grinder. I keep cats, and you know what fresh meat costs."

AS if with an effort, he tossed the pliers back. He had begun to sweat a little, and his voice wasn't as light as intended. "That's what I can do to property. Now, Vee, fix him up the way I told you."

Vivienne's face had gone altogether blank. She took a thick steel disc, some three inches in diameter, suspended from a light chain, and hung it around Koskinen's neck. Picking a spotweld gun off the bench, she closed the links. He felt the heat on his skin, even through the asbestos paper she used to protect him. When she was done, he wore a locket he could not remove without cutting tools.

Zigger had explained while Vivienne worked: "This is to make sure you behave. You're gonne be helping our lady scientist with that force screen of yours. Showing her how it works, making more like it, maybe improving it some. So maybe you got ideas about getting the gadget on your back and switching the screen on, someplace where a maser can't get at you. Well, forget that. This here is a fulgurite capsule with a radio detonator. If I hear you're acting funny, I'll go press a button and blow your head off. X?"

"Look out for stray signals, then," Koskinen snapped.

"Don't worry," Vivienne said. "The detonator is coded." She finished her job and released the chain, leaving the asbestos in place while the weld cooled.

"Let him go, Buck," Zigger said. Koskinen stumbled as his arms were released, rubbed his sore nose and scowled at them all.

Zigger beamed. "No hard feelings, Pete," he said. "I had to show you the bad side first. Now I can show you the good side. Care for a smoke? A happy pill? Got 'em right in my pocket here."

"No," Koskinen said.

"As long as you're a prisoner, you're property," Zigger said. "But the boys here aren't no property. They stick around because they know a good deal when they see one. I'd like to have you join us, Pete. From your own free choice, I mean.

"Now don't look so horrified. I'm not a crook. You got to realize that. I'm a government my-



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self. Sure. I make rules, and collect taxes, and take care of my people. What else is a government, huh? What'd Washington ever do for you that I can't do better? You want money, women, good food, good housing, fun and games? You can have 'em, right here, starting today, if you want. You wouldn't live in the Crater your whole life, neither. Change your face and you can go anywhere. I keep some mighty nice apartments, hunting lodges, villas, yachts, whatchamacallit, here and there around the world. I'll have a lot more once we've got those shields of yours ready. A hell of a lot more. Use your imagination, boy, and see what we might get us in the next few years. Want in on the game?"

Koskinen remained silent.

Zigger slapped his back. "Think it over, Pete," he said jovially. "Meanwhile, work hard and be good. So long." He went out. The guards followed him. The door closed behind them.

VIVIENNE struck a cigaret, sat down on a stool and smoked in short ferocious puffs. Koskinen wandered about the room. The bomb was a lump at the base of his throat. He glanced at the monitor screen. Someone was watching him, of course, from elsewhere in this warren. He felt like making an obscene gesture at the watchman, but decided not to. The shield unit lay on the bench. He fiddled nervously with the controls.

After a while, Vivienne stirred. "Well," she said.

He didn't answer.

"I'm sorry about that thing," she said. "I got my orders. I can get away with a lot, but a direct order from the boss—"

"Sure," he said.

"As for the rest . . . what he did . . . I suppose Zigger's no worse than the average gang baron. Probably not even much worse than any other government. He's right about being a government, you know."

"They don't practice torture in Washington," he muttered.

"I'm not so sure," she said.

He glanced at her, surprised. She hadn't said much about her past, for all the talking they had done. He gathered that she came from a well-to-do family and had gotten an education commensurate with her intelligence at a private school; that was interrupted by the war, and she had had a few bad years afterward, first in the refugee hordes and then as a semi-slave in a guerrilla band, until the police wiped them out and turned her over to the Institute. It gave her room, board, medical treatment, psychiatric help, and training in science. "I should think you'd be the last person to preach anarchism," he said.



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"Or archism, for that matter." Her smile was stiff. "I've been on the receiving end of both conditions." With a slight shake, as if to drive off her thoughts: "About Zigger. He was in a tough mood. Worried about Bones disappearing."

"Who?"

"Neff's pal. Remember, there were two guys in that restaurant? Neff went out to the fake taxi and captured you. Bones tailed you to the door."

"Oh, yes. The runt. I remember."

"He went back into town yesterday. He was supposed to report in by nightfall—Zigger had a job for him—but he hasn't shown yet and they can't find any trace of him out there."

"Violence?"

"Maybe. Though Zigger's people are more apt to dish that out than take it. Bones might have run afoul of a boy pack, of course, or even a raiding party from New Haven Crater. We've been fighting a sort of war with them for control of Yonkers low-level—Oh, the hell with this." Vivienne ground out her cigaret. "Everything's so sickening. Why doesn't the official government get off the dollar and clean out these pestholes?"

"I suppose they will in time," Koskinen said. "There've been too many other things to handle first, though. Maintaining the Protectorate takes so much money and energy that—"

"Don't talk to me about the Protectorate!" she burst out.

HE gaped at her. She broke into a shiver. Her eyes, close to tears, looked past him and past the wall. The nails bit into her palms.

"Why, what's wrong?" he ventured, and took a step toward her.

"If I believed in God," she said through her teeth, "I'd think he hated us—our country, our whole tribe—and saddled us with the Norris Doctrine so we'd maintain our own damnation and save him the trouble!"

"Huh? But . . . I mean, Vee, what else would you do? Do you want to fight a third thermonuclear war?"

Echoing in the back of his head were the words they had made him memorize in his current affairs class at the Institute:—*the future security of the United States. Therefore, from this moment henceforth, no other national state shall be permitted to keep arms or armed forces beyond what is needed for internal policing. Any attempt to manufacture, assemble, recruit, or otherwise prepare forces suitable for aggressive action, shall be an act of war against the United States, and the individuals responsible shall be arrested and*



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*tried as war criminals by an American military court. In order to prevent the secret accumulation of such forces, the United States will exercise an unlimited right of inspection. Otherwise national sovereignty will be fullly respected, and the United States guarantees the integrity of all national frontiers as of the date of this Proclamation. The United States recognizes that nations may adjust such frontiers by mutual agreement, and that the people of any nation may change their form of government by lawful or even revolutionary means. However, the United States reserves to itself the right of judgment as to whether any given change is consonant with its own security, and shall not permit changes which it deems potentially dangerous to its own and the world's future."*

Congress, the Supreme Court, and subsequent Presidents had elaborated the Norris Doctrine until the theory was a lawyer's paradise, Koskinen reminded himself. But the practice was simple enough for anyone to understand. The Americans maintained the last military services on Earth, and brought them to bear whenever the President decided the national interest required action. The day-to-day details of inspection, intelligence operations, evaluation of data, and advice to the executive, were in the hands of the Bureau of Military Security.

VIVIENNE didn't answer Koskinen's question. "We're not perfect," he said, "and, well, it's no fun being a self-appointed cop . . . and it's made us unpopular . . . but who else could be trusted with the job?"

She looked at him, then, and said: "MS tried to kill you."

"Well—Okay, they did." Argument stiffened his opinions. "They wouldn't have if . . . I mean, I'd rather have been cleanly shot than gone to some Chinese torture chamber . . . or come here, you know!"

"They killed my husband," she said.

He fell silent.

"Want to hear the story?" she asked without tone, turning her gaze from him again. "After my graduation I got a foreign service job, assistant science attaché, and drew an assignment to Brazil. Janio was an engineer there. Sweet and a little bit crazy and very young—oh, Lord, how young! Not much less than me in years, actually. But Brazil didn't get hit very hard in the war, and he'd scarcely seen anything of the aftermath. He hadn't been poisoned, as I'd been, and with him I finally began to feel clean again. We used to go bird watching on the river. . . .

"There was hothead conspir-



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acy. MS had vetoed a plan to mine some uranium deposits in the Serra Dourado, on the grounds that they didn't have inspectors enough to make sure that some of the stuff wasn't smuggled out and turned into bombs—"

Her voice trailed off. "Well, they don't," Koskinen said. Helpless before her emotion, he thought vaguely of turning the conversation into safer channels. "Inspection is a highly technical job. There aren't many qualified men available. And even one country is such a big place. How do you think the Chinese, for instance, keep that network of agents and agitators going? The Chinese government disowns the organization officially, and the whole world knows they support it clandestinely, and there's nothing we can do because we haven't got people enough to govern China ourselves."

"Uh-huh," she said dully. "In China there's at least a fairly honest and fairly competent government, however much they hate us behind those bland smiles. Most other places, we just prop up a bunch of corrupt faineants, because we know they won't make trouble . . . and to hell with whether their people have a life worth the effort of living. Oh, yes, we talk noninterference in foreign internal affairs; but in practice—I've been in the diplomatic service, I tell you. I know."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

THANKS for that apology, Pete. You remind me of Janio, a little. . . . Oh. What happened. Those mines would have given work to a lot of hungry paupers. Some nuts decided to overthrow the Brazilian government, establish a new one that wasn't a puppet, and talk back to the Yankees. The conspiracy flopped. An amateur job. MS and the Brazilian secret service caught everybody. Including Janio, who was not one of them. I should know that too, shouldn't I? My own Johnny! I knew where he spent his time. But he had been angry about the Serra Dourada business, along with a lot of other things. He was a proud guy, and he wanted his country to go her own way. He'd spoken his piece—what does our First Amendment say?—and it's true that some of his friends were in the plot.

"They brought us to Washington for trial. Me too; I wasn't arrested myself, but I came along, of course. There were interrogations under drugs. I thought that would clear Johnny. Instead, someone I'd never met before swore in court that he'd seen my husband at some of those meetings. I called him a liar under oath. I *knew* Johnny'd



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been with me on several of those exact dates. You know the funny little associations that stick something into your memory, we must have been camped on that Amazon island the weekend of the 23rd because we saw twenty-three macaws fly by, emerald green in a pink sunrise, and he said the gods were providing me with a calendar because they also thought I was beautiful. . . . That sort of thing.

"So they found him guilty. And shot him. And I was charged with perjury. But they gave me probation. Scientists are valuable and so forth. One evening, a year or so later, I met a business executive with high government connections at a party in Manhattan. He got so drunk that he spilled to me why Johnny had been orbited. The PI exam had shown he was 'a strongly potential insurrectionist.' That is, he might someday get fed up with being shoved around in his own country, and do something about it. Better kill him now. 'Before he helps build a bomb, or finds one of the big missiles still hidden here and there with all records on them lost. He could kill millions of us,' the executive said. My Johnny!

"The next day I went down to low-level. Mostly I wanted to get drunk, doped, killed if I was lucky. But I got picked up by Zigger instead. Kidnap, I suppose, technically; but it didn't seem to matter much; and what the hell, it's one way of striking back at them."

HER words faded. She sat quiet, the tall body slumped, until finally she took forth a cigaret and struck it. But after a few puffs she let it burn out between her fingers.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," Koskinen whispered.

"Thanks," she said roughly. "My turn to apologize, though. I didn't mean to unload my troubles on you."

"I suppose any body of men get . . . excessive . . . when they have power."

"Yes, no doubt. When the power isn't restricted, at least."

"And MS can't very well be restricted, if it's to do its work. Although the shield effect—might make MS unnecessary—You could shield against atomic bombs, given a large enough unit."

She stirred and looked at him with a hint of life. "Hardly practical," she said. Her voice was unsteady, now and then she bit her lip, but she found impersonal phrases. "Especially since a bomb could be smuggled in piecemeal, assembled inside the target area. Or there are other nasty weapons, bacteria, gas. Don't get me wrong, Pete. I hate Marcus and his MS goons as much as



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anyone has ever hated. But I'm not so naive I think any other country would maintain the peace better. And one way or another, I suppose the job does have to be done: because any sovereign state is a monster, without morals or brains, that'd incinerate half the human race to get its sovereign way."

"An international organization—"

"Too late now," she sighed. "Who could we trust?" With a stubborn striving to be fair: "Besides, we do have a society of our own here, a way we prefer to live, the same as Brazil or China has. We won't surrender that to some world policeman; we can't, and remain what we are. And yet I don't see how a world police force could be made workable without a world community. So maybe the Pax Americana is the only answer."

He stared down at the unit on the bench, remembering how Elkor had blessed it on the day the ship departed. The Martian had endured all the agonies of delayed hibernation so he could bid his humans farewell. "This thing, though," Koskinen protested. "There must be some way to use it. Not too many people in either atomic war got caught by blast or the immediate radiation. Fallout was what got them, or anarchy, or disease. A shield unit would protect you against those things, as well as gas and—"

"Sure," Vivienne said. "That's why Zigger wants to outfit his bully boys with your screens. There'd be no stopping him then. In ten years he'd own low-level from here to California, and a good part of the legitimate world too."

"And we're supposed to make them for him?" Koskinen cried.

"And improve them, in time. If we don't, he can hire engineers to do so. The job doesn't look extremely difficult."

"No. . . . I can't. I've got to get this to the police!"

"Which means to MS," she said slowly.

"Well—I suppose so."

"Which means Director Hugh Marcus. Imagine what he'll do then.

Koskinen stood quietly. She pursued pitilessly. "If not Marcus, then somebody else. You simply haven't thought out the implications. Invulnerability! Give anyone who has power, from Zigger on up through Marcus or the dictator of China . . . give anyone who has power over other human beings invulnerability, and you free that power from the last trace of accountability. From then on, anything goes.

"I'd rather Zigger got this thing," she finished. "All he wants, really, is plunder. Not the souls of the whole human race."

**Concluded next month**



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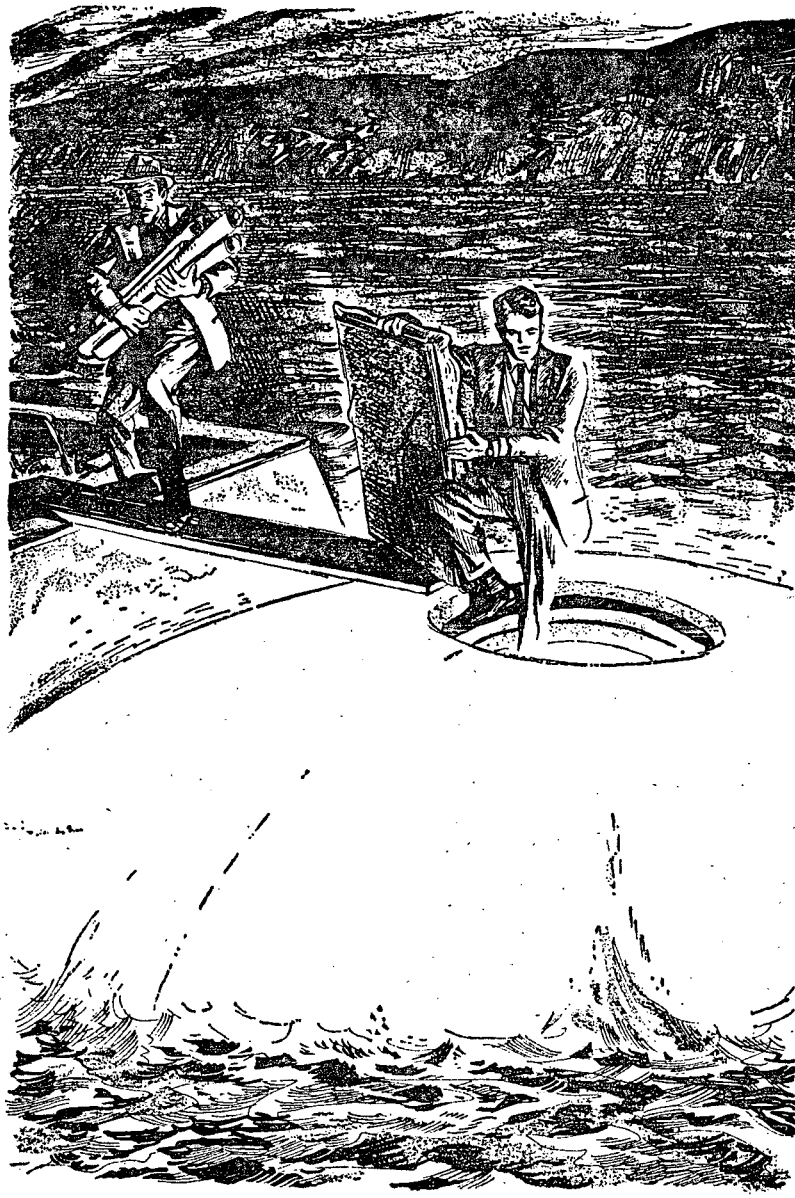

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# the PAST MASTER

By ROBERT BLOCH

*ONLY two years ago, Robert Bloch was a regular contributor to* AMAZING STORIES *and* FANTASTIC. *Today, his position in the writing world has moved so giant a step forward, that only in the rerunning of fantasies from obscure sources is it economically feasible for his fiction to appear in this magazine's pages.*

*The change came when Bloch's good friend, Samuel Peeples an established and successful Hollywood writer, with a life-long interest in science fiction (See Preface* Travelers of Space, *Gnome Press, 1951) virtually subsidized his visit to the film and television capitol of the nation and got him to try his hand at some scripts.*

*Even without any special break, Robert Bloch was clicking on talent alone, but when the moving picture* Psycho, *based on a novel of Bloch's, proved the second highest dollar earner in black and white motion picture history, it caused a far-from-subtle change in attitudes. Ever since, Bloch has been kept so busy at the typewriter, including many stories for* Thriller *and* Alfred Hitchcock, *that even a friendly letter to the family costs him several hundred dollars in writing time.*

*As far as science fiction circles are concerned, it couldn't happen to a nicer guy and if any one else wants the formula to Bloch's successful career it is simple: First, get born with loads of talent and then slug away for 25 years, selling a thousand pieces to several hundred diverse markets and if your lucky, some friend will invite you to Hollywood where all you have to do is satisfy the whims of producers who don't know what they want until they see it.*

*Robert Bloch, born April 5, 1917, caught the writing bug when he struck up correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft in 1932. His first story,* Lilies, *a ghost tale, appeared in the Winter, 1934 issue of William Crawford's semi-professional magazine* MARVEL TALES, *repository of many off-trail stories of that period. Farnsworth Wright, editor of* WEIRD TALES, *actually bought and paid for a story that same*

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*year, making Bloch a professional at the age of 17.*

*In his early years he used H. P. Lovecraft as a model and the best of the stories from that phase of his writing may be found in his first collection* The Opener of the Way *published by Arkham House in 1945. Trained in the writing of what were essentially weird fantasies, when Bloch enlarged his field of operations, he at first, tended to submit to allied publications such as* STRANGE STORIES, *but membership in the Milwaukee Fictioneers, a writing circle which included Raymond A. Palmer, resulted in sales to* AMAZING STORIES. *Unquestionably his most famous story in that magazine was* The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton (AMAZING STORIES, *March, 1939) which encouraged him to make science fiction a regular part of his writing pattern thereafter.*

The Time Master *represents one of Bloch's frequent forays outside of the fantasy field's magazines, but it is a science fiction story and unquestionably one of the finest he has written. Published in the Jan., 1955 issue of* BLUEBOOK, *a publication that used to represent a prestige sale for a fantasy writer it has not been reprinted until now.*

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**Statement of Dorothy Laritzky**

HONESTLY, I could just *die*. The way George acts, you'd think it was *my* fault or something. You'd think he never even *saw* the guy. You'd think *I* stole his car. And he keeps asking me to *explain* everything to him. If I told him once, I told him a hundred times—and the cops too. Besides, what's there to *tell* him? He was there.

Of *course* it doesn't make sense. I already know that. Honest to Pete, I wish I'd stayed home Sunday. I wish I'd told George I had another date when he called up. I wish I'd made him take me to the show instead of that old beach. Him and his convertible! Besides, your legs stick to those leather seats in hot weather.

But you should of seen me Sunday when he called. You'd think he was taking me to *Florida* or someplace, the way I acted. I had this new slack suit I bought at Sterns, with the plaid top, sort of a halter, like. And I quick put on some more of that Restora Rinse. You know, George is the one down at the office who started everybody calling me "Blondie."

So anyhow he came around and picked me up about four, and it was still hot and he had the top down. I guess he just finished washing the car. It looked real snazzy, and he said, "Boy, it just matches your hair, don't it?"



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First we drove along the Parkway and then out over the Drive. It was just *packed*, the cars, I mean. So he said how about it if we didn't go to the beach until after dinner.

That was all right by me, so we went to this Luigi's—it's a seafood place way south on the highway. It's real expensive and they got one of those big menus with all kinds of ozzy stuff like pompanos and terrapins. That's a turtle, like.

I had a sirloin and French fries, and George had—I can't remember, oh, yes I do—he had fried chicken. Before we ate we had a couple drinks, and after we just sat in the booth and had a couple more. We were sort of kidding back and forth, you know, about the beach and all, and waiting until after dark so we could go swimming on account of not bringing any suits.

ANYWAYS, *I* was kidding. That George, *he* just as soon do anything. And don't think I didn't *know* why he was feeding me all those drinks. When we went out he stopped over at the bar and picked up a pint.

The moon was just coming up, almost full, and we started singing while we drove, and I felt like I was getting right with it. So when he said let's not go to the regular beach—he knew this little place way off somewhere.

It was like a bay, sort of, and you could park up on the bluff along this side road, and then walk down to the sand and see way out across the water.

Only that's not why George picked it. He wasn't interested in looking at water. First thing he did was to spread out this big beach blanket, and the second thing he did was open up his pint, and the third thing he did was to start monkeying around.

Nothing serious, you understand, just monkeying around, kind of. Well, he's not so bad-looking, even with that busted nose of his, and we kept working on that pint, and it was kind of romantic, with the moon and all.

It wasn't until he really began *messing* that I made him stop. And even then, I practically had to *sock* him one before he figured out I wasn't kidding.

"Cut it out," I said. "Now see what you've done! You tore my halter."

"Hell, I'll buy you a new one," he said. "Come on, baby." He tried to grab me again, and I gave him a good one, right on the side of his head. For a minute I thought he'd—you know—get tough about it. But he was pretty canned up, I guess. Anyhow, he just started blubbering. About how sorry he was, and that he knew I wasn't that kind, but it was just that he was so crazy about me.



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I almost had to laugh, they're so funny when they get that way. But I figured it was smarter to put on an act, so I made out like I was real sore, like I'd never been so insulted in all my life.

Then he said we should have another drink and forget about it, only the pint was empty. So he said how about him taking a run up to the road and getting some more? Or we could both go to a tavern if I liked.

"With all these *marks* on my neck?" I told him. "I certainly will not! If you want more, *you* get it."

So he said he would, and he'd be back in five minutes. And he went.

Anyhow, that's how I was alone, when it happened. I was just sitting there on the blanket, looking out at the water, when I saw this thing sort of moving. At first it looked sort of like a log or something. But it kept coming closer, and then I could see it was somebody swimming, real fast.

So I kept on watching, and pretty soon I made out it was a man, and he was heading right for shore. Then he got close enough so's I could see him stand up and start wading in. He was real tall, *real* tall, like one of those basketball players, only not skinny or anything. And so help me he didn't have any trunks on or anything. Not a *stitch!*

Well, I mean, what could *I* do? I figured he didn't see me, and besides, you can't go running around screaming your head off. Not that there was anyone to hear me. I was all alone there. So I just sat and waited for him to come out of the water and go away up the beach or someplace.

Only he didn't go away. He came out and he walked right over to me. You can *imagine*—there I was sitting, and there *he* was, all dripping wet and with no clothes. But he gave me a big hello, just like nothing was wrong. He looked real dreamy when he smiled.

"Good evening," he said. "Might I inquire my whereabouts, Miss?"

*Dig* that "whereabouts" talk!

So I told him where he was, and he nodded, and then he saw how I was staring and he said, "Might I trouble you for the loan of that blanket?"

Well, what else could I do? I got up and gave it to him and he wrapped it around his waist. That's the first I noticed he was carrying this bag in his hand. It was some kind of plastic, and you couldn't tell what was inside it

"What happened to your trunks?" I asked him.

"Trunks?" You'd of thought he never heard of such things



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the way he said it. Then he smiled again and said, "I'm sorry. They must have slipped off."

"Where'd you start from?" I asked. "You got a boat out there?" He was real tan, he looked like one of these guys that hang around the Yacht Basin all the time.

"Yes. How did you know?" he said.

"Well, where else would you come from?" I told him. "It just stands to reason."

"It does, at that," he said.

I looked at the bag. "What you got in there?" I asked.

HE opened his mouth to answer me, but he never got a chance. Because all of a sudden George came running down from the bluff. I never even seen his lights or heard the car stop. But there he was, just *tearing* down, with a bottle in his hand, all ready to swing. *Character!*

"What the hell's going on here?" he yelled.

"Nothing," I told him.

"Who the hell is this guy? Where'd he come from?" George shouted.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the guy said. "My name is John Smith and—"

"John Smith my foot!" yelled George, only he didn't say "foot." He was real mad. "All right, let's have it. What's the big idea, you two?"

"There isn't any big idea," I said. "This man was swimming and he lost his trunks, so he borrowed the blanket. He's got a boat out there and—"

"Where? Where's the boat? I don't see any boat." Neither did I, come to think of it. George wasn't waiting for any answers, though. "You there, gimme back that blanket and get the hell out of here."

"He can't," I told him. "He hasn't got any trunks on."

George stood there with his mouth open. Then he waved the bottle. "All right, then, fella. You're coming with us." He gave me a wise look. "Know what I think?" I think this guy's a phony. He could even be one of those spies the Russians are sending over in submarines."

That's George for you. Ever since the papers got full of this war scare, he's been seeing Communists all over the place.

"Start talking," he said. "What's in that bag?"

The guy just looked at him and smiled.

"Okay, so you want to do it the hard way, it's okay by me. Get up that bluff, fella. We're gonna take a ride over to the police. Come on, before I let you have it." And he waved the bottle.

The guy sort of shrugged and then he looked at George. "You have an automobile?" he asked.



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"Of course, what do I look like, Paul Revere or something?" George said.

"Paul Revere? Is he alive?" The guy was kidding, but George didn't know it.

"Shut up and get moving," he said. "The car's right up there."

THE guy looked up at the car. Then he nodded to himself and he looked at George.

That's all he did. So help me. He just *looked* at him.

He didn't make any of those funny passes with his hands, and he didn't say anything. He just *looked,* and he kept right on smiling. His face didn't change a bit.

But George—his face changed. It just sort of set, like it was frozen stiff. And so did everything. I mean, his hands got numb and the bottle fell and busted. George was like he couldn't move.

I opened my mouth but the guy kind of glanced over at me and I thought maybe I'd better not say anything. All of a sudden I felt cold all over, and I didn't know *what* would happen if he looked at me.

So I stood there, and then this guy went up to George and undressed him. Only it wasn't exactly undressing him, because George was just like one of those window dummies you see in the stores. Then the guy put all of George's clothes on himself, and he put the blanket around George. I could see he had this plastic bag in one hand and George's car keys in the other hand.

I WAS going to scream, only the guy looked at me again and I couldn't. I didn't feel stiff like George, or paralyzed, or anything like that. But I couldn't scream to save my neck. And what good would it of done anyhow?

Because this guy just walked right up the side of the bluff and climbed in George's car and drove away. He never said a word, he never looked back. He just went.

Then I could scream, but good. I was still screaming when George came out of it, and I thought he'd have a hemorrhage or something.

Well, we had to walk back *all* the way. It was over three miles to the highway patrol, and they made me tell the whole thing over and over again a dozen times. They got George's license number and they're still looking for the car. And this sergeant, he thinks George is maybe right about this guy working for the Communists.

Only he didn't see the way the guy *looked* at George. Every time I think about it, I could just *die!*



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**Statement of Milo Fabian**

I SCARCELY got the drapes pulled when he walked in. Of course, at first I thought he was delivering something. He wore a pair of those atrocious olive-drab slacks and a ready-made sports jacket, and he had on one of those caps that look a little like those worn by jockeys.

"Well, what is it?" I said. I'm afraid I was just a wee bit rude about it—truth to tell, I'd been in a perfectly filthy mood ever since Jerry told me he was running up to Cape Cod for the exhibit. You'd think he might at least have considered my feelings and invited me to go along. But no, I had to stay behind and keep the gallery open.

But I actually had no excuse for being spiteful to this stranger. I mean, he was rather an attractive sort of person when he took that idiotic cap off. He had black, curly hair and he was quite tall, really immense; I was almost afraid of him until he smiled.

"Mr. Warlock?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"This *is* the Warlock Gallery, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Mr. Warlock is out of the city. I'm Mr. Fabian. Can I help you?"

"It's rather a delicate matter."

"If you have something to sell, I do the buying for the Gallery."

"I've nothing to sell. I want to purchase some paintings."

"Well, in that case, won't you come right back with me, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

We started down the aisle together. "Could you tell me just what you had in mind?" I asked. "As you probably know, we tend to specialize in moderns. We have a very good Kandinsky now, and an early Mondrian—"

"You don't have the pictures I want here," he said. "I'm sure of it."

We were already in the gallery. I stopped. "Then what was it you wished?"

He stood there, swinging this perfectly enormous plastic pouch. "You mean what kind of paintings? Well, I want one or two good Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Raphael, something by Titian, a van Gogh, a Tintoretto. Also Goya, an El Greco, a Breughel, a Hals, a Holbein, a Gaugin I don't suppose there's a way of getting *The Last Supper*—that was done as a fresco wasn't it?"

It was positively weird to hear the man. I'm afraid I was definitely piqued, and I showed it. "Please!" I said. "I happen to be busy this morning. I have no time to—"

"You don't understand," he answered. "You buy pictures, don't you? Well, I want you to buy me some. As my—my agent, that's the word, isn't it?"



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"That's the word," I told him. "But surely you can't be serious. Have you any idea of the cost involved in acquiring such a collection? It would be simply fabulous."

"I've got money," he said. We were standing next to the deal table at the entrance, and he walked over to it and put his pouch down. Then he zipped it open.

I have never, but simply never, seen such a fantastic sight in my life. That pouch was full of bills, stack after stack of bills, and every single one was either a five- or a 10-thousand dollar denomination. I *mean* it; he had this huge pouch filled with five- and 10-thousand dollar bills. Why, I'd never even seen one before!

If he'd been carrying twenties or hundreds, I might have suspected counterfeits, but nobody would have the audacity to dream of getting away with a stunt like this. They looked genuine, and they were. I know, because—but that's for later.

So there I stood, looking at this utterly mad heap of money lying there, and this Mr. Smith, as he called himself, said, "Well, do you think I have enough?"

I COULD have just passed out, thinking about it. Imagine, a perfect stranger, walking in off the street with 10 million dollars to buy paintings. And *my* share of the commission is five percent!

"I don't know," I said. "You're really serious about all this?"

"Here's the money. How soon can you get me what I want?"

"Please, I said." "This is all so unusual, I hardly know where to begin. Do you have a definite list of what you wish to acquire?"

"I can write the names down for you," he told me. "I remember most of them."

He knew what he wanted, I must say. Velásquez, Gorgione, Cézanne, Degas, Utrillo, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Delacroix, Ryder, Pissaro—

Then he began writing titles. I'm afraid I gasped. "Really," I said. "You can't actually expect to buy the Mona Lisa!"

"Why not?" He looked perfectly serious.

"It's not for sale at any price, you know."

"I didn't know. Who owns it?"

"The Louvre. In Paris."

"I didn't know." He *was* serious, I'd swear he was. "But what about the rest?"

"I'm afraid many of these paintings are in the same category. They're not for sale. Most of them are in public galleries and museums here and abroad. And a number of the particular works you request are in the hands of private collectors who could never be persuaded to sell."



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He stood up and began scooping the money back into his pouch. I took his arm.

"But we can certainly do our best," I said. "We have our sources, our connections. I'm sure we can at least procure some of the lesser, representative pieces by every one of the masters you list. It's merely a matter of time."

He shook his head. "Won't do. This is Tuesday, isn't it? I've got to have everything by Sunday night."

Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous in all your life? The man was stark staring.

"Look," he said. "I'm beginning to understand how things are. These paintings I want they're scattered all over the world. Owned by public museums and private parties who won't sell. And I suppose the same thing is true of manuscripts. Things like the Gutenberg Bible. Shakespeare first folios. The Declaration of Independence—"

Stark staring. I didn't trust myself to do anything but nod at him.

"How many of the things I want are here?" he asked. "Here, in this country?"

"A fair percentage, well over half."

"All right. Here's what you do. Sit down over there and make me up a list. I want you to write me down the names of the paintings I've noted, and just where they are. I'll give you $10,000 for the list."

Ten thousand dollars for a list he could have acquired free of charge at the public library! Ten thousand dollars for less than an hour's work!

I gave him his list. And he gave me the money and walked out with the list.

By this time I was just about frantic. I mean, it was all so *shattering*. He came and he went, and there I stood—not knowing his real name, or anything. Talk about your eccentric millionaires! He went, and there I stood with $10,000 in my hand.

Well, I'm not one to do anything rash. He hadn't been gone three minutes before I locked up and stepped over to the bank. I simply *hopped* all the way back to the gallery.

Then I said to myself, "What for?"

I didn't have to go back now, really. This was my money, not Jerry's. I'd earned it all by my little self. And as for him, he could stay up at the Cape and rot. I didn't need his precious job.

I went right down and bought a ticket to Paris. All this war-scare talk is simply a lot of fluff, if you ask me. Sheer fluff.

Of course Jerry is going to be utterly furious when he hears about it. Well, let him. All I have



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to say is, he can get himself another boy.

### Statement of Nick Krauss

I WAS dead on my feet. I'd been on the job ever since Tuesday night and here it was Saturday. Talk about living on your nerves!

But I wasn't missing out on this deal, not me. Because this was the pay-off. The pay-off to the biggest caper that was ever rigged.

Sure, I heard of the Brink's job. I even got a pretty good idea who was in on it. But that was peanuts, and it took better'n a year to set up.

This deal topped 'em all. Figure it for yourself, once. Six million bucks, cash. In four days. Get that, now. I said six million bucks in four days. That's all, brother!

And who did it? Me, that's who.

Let me tell you one thing: I earned that dough. Every lousy cent of it. And don't think I didn't have to shell out plenty in splits. Right now I can't even remember just how many was in on it from beginning to end. But what with splits and expenses—I guess it cost pretty near a million and a half, just to swing it.

That left four and a half million. Four and a half million—and me going down to the yacht to collect.

I had the whole damn haul right in the truck. A hundred and forty pieces, some of 'em plenty heavy, too. But I wasn't letting nobody else horse around with unloading. This was dynamite. Only two miles from the warehouse where I got everything assembled. Longest two miles I ever drove.

Sure, I had a warehouse. What the hell, I *bought* the thing! Bought the yacht for him, too. Paid cash. When you got six million in cash to play with, you don't take no chances on something you can just as well buy without no trouble.

Plenty of chances the way it was. Had to take chances, working that fast. Beat me how I managed to get through the deal without a dozen leaks.

But the dough helped. You take a guy, he'll rat on you for two-three grand. Give him 20 or 30, and he's yours. I'm not just talking syndicate, either. Because there was plenty guys in on it that weren't even in no mob—guys that never been mugged except maybe for these here college annual books where they show pictures of all the professors. I paid off guards and I paid off coppers and I paid off a bunch of curators, too. Not characters, curators. Guys that run museums.

I still don't know what this joker wanted with all that stuff. Only thing I can figure is maybe



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he was one of these here Indian rajahs or something. But he didn't look like no Hindu—he was a big, tall, youngish guy. Didn't talk like one, either. But who else wants to lay out all that lettuce for a bunch of dizzy paintings and stuff?

ANYWAYS, he showed up Tuesday night with this pouch of his. How he got to me, how he ever got by Lefty downstairs I never figured out.

But there he was. He asked me if it was true, what he heard about me, and he asked me if I wanted to do a job. Said his name was Smith. You know the kind of con you get when they want to stay dummied up on you.

I didn't care if he dummied up or not. Because, like the fella says, money talks. And it sure hollered Tuesday night. He opens this pouch of his and spills two million bucks on the table.

So help me, two million bucks! Cash!

"I've brought this along for expenses," he said. "There's four million more in it if you can cooperate."

Let's skip the rest of it. We made a deal, and I went to work. Wednesday I had him on that yacht, and he stayed there all the way through. Every night I went down and reported.

I went to Washington myself and handled the New York and Philadelphia end, too. Also Boston, on Friday. The rest was by phone, mostly. I kept flying guys out with orders and cash to Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and the Coast. They had the lists and they knew what to look for. Every mob I contacted set up its own plans for the job. I paid whatever they asked, and that way nobody had any squawks coming. No good any of 'em holding out on me—where could they sell the stuff? Those things are too hot for anyone else to touch.

BY the time Thursday come around, I was up to my damn neck in diagrams and room plans and getaway routes. There was six guys just checking on alarm systems and stuff in the joints I was suppose to cover. We had maybe 50 working in New York, not counting from the inside. You wouldn't believe it if I told you some of the guys who helped. Big professors and all, tipping us off on how to make a heist, or cutting wires and leaving doors unlocked. I hear a dozen up and lammed after it was over. That's what *real* dough can buy you.

Of course I run into trouble. Lots of it. We never did get a haul out of L.A. The fix wasn't in the way it was supposed to be, and they lost the whole load trying for a getaway at the airport. Lucky thing the cops shot up all four of the guys, the ones who



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made the haul. So they couldn't trace anything.

All told, must of been seven or eight cashed in; the four in L.A., two in Philly, one guy in Detroit and one in Chicago. But no leaks. I kept the wires open, and I had my people out there, sort of supervising. Every bit of the stuff we did get came in by private plane, over in Jersey. Went right to the warehouse.

And I had the whole works, 143 pieces, on the truck when I went down for the pay-off.

IT took me three hours to cart that stuff onto the yacht. This guy, this Mr. Smith, he just sat quietly and watched the whole time.

When I was done I said, "That's the works. You satisfied now or do you want a receipt?"

He didn't smile or anything. Just shook his head. "You'll have to open them up," he said.

"Open 'em up? That'll take another couple hours," I told him.

"We've got time," he said.

"Hell we have! Mister, this stuff's hot and I'm hotter. There's maybe a hundred thousand honest johns looking for the loot—ain't you read the papers or heard the radio? Whole damn country's in an uproar. Worse than the war crisis or whatever you call it. I want out of here, fast."

BUT he wanted them crates and boxes open, so I opened 'em. What the hell, for four million bucks, a little flunkey work don't hurt. Not even when you're dead for sleep. It was a tough job, though, because everything was packed nice. So as not to have any damage, that is.

Nothing was in frames. He had these canvasses and stuff all over the floor, and he checked them off in a notebook, every one. And when I got the last damn picture out and hauled all the wood and junk up on deck and put it over the side in the dark, I come back to find him in the forward cabin.

"What's the pitch?" I asked. "Where you going?"

"To transfer these to my ship," he told me. "After all, you didn't expect I'd merely sail off in this vessel, did you? And I'll need your assistance to get them on board. Don't worry, it's only a short distance away."

He started the engines. I came right up behind him and stuck my Special in his ribs.

"Where's the bundle?" I asked.

"In the other cabin, on the table." He didn't even look around.

"You're not pulling anything, are you?"

"See for yourself."

I went to see. And he was leveling.

Four million bucks on the table. Five- and 10-thousand-dollar



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bills, and no phony geetus either. Wouldn't be too damn easy passing this stuff—the Feds would have the word out about big bills—but then, I didn't count on sticking around with the loot. There's plenty countries where they like them big bills and don't ask any questions. South America, such places. That part didn't worry me too much, as long as I knew I'd get there.

And I figured on getting there all right. I went back to the other cabin and showed him my Special again. "Keep going," I said. "I'll help you, but the first time you get cute I'm set to remove your appendix with a slug."

He knew who I was. He knew I could just let him have it and skid out of there any time I wanted. But he never even blinked at me—just kept right on steering.

We must of gone about four-miles. It was pitch dark and he didn't carry any spot, but he knew where he was going. Because all at once we stopped and he said, "Here we are."

I went up on deck with him and I couldn't see nothing. Just the lights off on shore and the water all around. I sure as hell didn't see no boat anywheres.

"Where is it?" I asked him.

"Where is what?"

"Your boat?"

"Down there." He pointed over the side.

"What the hell you got, a submarine or something?"

"Something." He leaned over the side. His hands was empty, he didn't do anything but lean. And so help me, all of a sudden up comes this damn thing. Like a big round silver ball, sort of, with a lid on top.

I didn't even notice the lid until it opened up. And it floated alongside, so's he could run the gangplank out to rest on the lid.

"Come on," he said. "I'll help you. It won't take long this way."

"You think I'm gonna carry stuff across that lousy plank?" I asked him. "In the dark?"

"Don't worry, you can't fall. It's magnomeshed."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll show you."

He walked across that plank and climbed right down into the thing before I thought to try and stop him. The plank never moved an inch.

Then he was back out. "Come on, there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Who's afraid?"

BUT I was scared, plenty. Because now I knew what he was. I'd been reading the papers a lot these days, and I didn't miss none of the war talk. Them Commies with all their new weapons and stuff—well, this was one of them. It is no wonder he was



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tossing around millions of bucks like that.

So I figured doing my patriotic duty. Sure, I'd haul his lousy pictures on board for him. I wanted to get a look inside that sub of his. But when I finished, I made up my mind he wasn't gonna streak out for Russia or someplace. I'd get him first.

That's the way I played it. I helped him cart the whole mess down into the sub.

Then I changed my mind again. He wasn't no Russian. He wasn't anything I ever heard of except an inventor, maybe. Because that thing he had was crazy.

It was all hollow inside. All hollow, with just a thin wall around. I could tell there wasn't space for an engine or anything. Just enough room to stack the stuff and leave space for maybe two or three guys to stand.

There wasn't any electric light in the place either, but it was light. And *daylight*. I know what I'm talking about—I know about neon and fluorescent lights too. This was something else. Something new.

Instruments? Well, he had some kind of little slots on one part, but they was down on the floor. You had to lay down next to them to see how they'd work. And he kept watching me, so I didn't want to take a chance on acting too nosy.

I was scared because he *wasn't* scared.

I was scared because he *wasn't* no Russian.

I was scared because there ain't any round balls that float in water, or come up from under water when you just look at 'em. And because he come from nowhere with his cash and he was going nowhere with the pictures. Nothing made any sense any more, except one thing. I wanted out. I wanted out bad.

Maybe you think I'm nuts, but that's because you never was inside a shiny ball floating in water, only not bobbing around or even moving when the waves hit it, and all daylight with nothing to light it with. You never saw this Mr. Smith who wasn't named Smith and maybe not even Mr.

But if you had, you would of understood why I was so glad to get back on that yacht and go down in the cabin and pick up the dough.

"All right," I said. "Let's go back."

"Leave whenever you like," he said. "I'm going myself now."

"Going yourself? Then how the hell do I get back?" I yelled.

"Take the yacht," he told me. "It's yours." Just like that he said it.

"But I can't run no yacht, I don't know how."

"It's very simple. Here, I'll ex-



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plain—I picked it up myself in less than a minute. Come up to the cabin."

"Uh uh." I got the Special out. "You're taking me back to the dock right now."

"Sorry, there isn't time. I want to be on my way before—"

"You heard me," I said. "Get this boat moving. No more stalling or I use the gun."

"Please. You're making this difficult. I must leave now. I can't waste any more time."

"First you take me back. Then you go off to Mars or wherever it is."

"Mars? Who said anything about—"

He sort of smiled and shook his head. And then he looked at me.

He looked—right—at—me. He looked—*into*—me. His eyes were like two of those big round silver balls, rolling down into slots behind my eyeballs and crashing right into my skull. They came towards me real slow and real heavy, and I couldn't duck. I felt them coming, and I knew if they ever hit I'd be a goner. But I couldn't move.

I was out on my feet. Everything was numb. He just smiled and stared and sent his eyes out to get me. They rolled and rolled and I could feel them hit. Then I was—gone.

The last thing I remember was pulling the trigger.

**Statement of Elizabeth Rafferty, M.D.**

AT 9:30 Sunday morning, he rang the bell. I remember the time exactly, because I'd just finished breakfast and I was switching on the radio to get the war news. Apparently they'd found another Soviet boat, this one in Charleston Harbor, with an atomic device aboard. The Coast Guard and the Air Force were both on emergency, and it—

The bell rang, and I opened the door.

There he stood. He must have been 6-foot-4, at the very least. I had to look up at him to see his smile, but it was worth it.

"Is the doctor in?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Rafferty."

"Good. I was hoping I'd be lucky enough to find you here. I just came along the street, taking a chance on locating a physician. You see, it's rather an emergency—"

"I gathered that." I stepped back. "Won't you come inside? I dislike having my patients bleed all over the front stoop."

He glanced down at his left arm. He was bleeding, all right. And from the hole in his coat, and the powder-marks, I knew why.

"In here," I said. We went into the office. "Now, if you'll let me help you with your coat and shirt, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.



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"Of course. Up on the table. That's it. Now, easy—let me do it—there. Well! A nice neat perforation, upper triceps. In again, out again. It looks as if you were lucky, Mr. Smith. Hold still now. I'm going to probe. . . . This may hurt a bit. . . . Good! . . . We'll just sterilize, now—"

All the while I kept watching him. He had a gambler's face, but not the mannerisms. I couldn't make up my mind about him. He went through the whole procedure without a sound or a change of expression.

Finally I got him bandaged up. "Your arm will probably be stiff for several days. I wouldn't advise you to move around too much. How did it happen?"

"Accident."

"Come now, Mr. Smith." I got out the pen and looked for a form. "Let's not be children. You know as well as I do that a physician must make a full report on any gunshot wound."

"I didn't know." He swung off the table. "Who gets the report?"

"The police."

"No!"

"Please, Mr. Smith! I'm required by law to—"

"Take this."

He fished something out of his pocket with his right hand and threw it on the desk. I stared at it. I'd never seen a 5,000-dollar bill before, and it was worth staring at.

"I'm going now," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've never really been here."

I shrugged. "As you will," I told him. "Just one thing more, though."

"What's that?"

I stooped, reached into the left-hand upper drawer of the desk, and showed him what I kept there.

"This is a .22, Mr. Smith," I said. "It's a lady's gun. I've never used it before, except on the target range. I would hate to use it now, but I warn you that if I do you're going to have trouble with your right arm. As a physician, my knowledge of anatomy combines with my ability as a marksman. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. But you don't. Look, you've got to let me go. It's important. I'm not a criminal!"

"Nobody said you were. But you will be, if you attempt to evade the law by neglecting to answer my questions for this report. It must be in the hands of the authorities within the next twenty-four hours."

He chuckled. "They'll never read it."

I SIGHED. "Let's not argue. And don't reach into your pocket, either."

He smiled at me. "I have no weapon. I was just going to increase your fee."

Another bill fluttered to the



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table. Ten thousand dollars. Five thousand plus 10 thousand makes 15. It added up.

"Sorry," I said. "This all looks very tempting to a struggling young doctor—but I happen to have old-fashioned ideas about such things. Besides, I doubt if I could get change from anyone, because of all this excitement in the newspapers over—"

I stopped, suddenly, as I remembered. Five-thousand and 10-thousand-dollar bills. They added up, all right. I smiled at him across the desk.

"Where are the paintings, Mr. Smith?" I asked.

It was his turn to sigh. "Please, don't question me. I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to go, before it's too late. You were kind to me. I'm grateful. Take the money and forget it. This report is foolishness, believe me."

"Believe you? With the whole country in an uproar, looking for stolen art masterpieces, and Communists hiding under every bed? Maybe it's just feminine curiosity, but I'd like to know." I took careful aim. "This isn't conversation, Mr. Smith. Either you talk or I shoot."

"All right. But it won't do any good." He leaned forward. "You've got to believe that. It won't do any good. I could show you the paintings, yes. I could *give* them to you. And it wouldn't help a bit. Within twenty-four hours they'd be as useless as that report you wanted to fill out."

"Oh, yes, the report. We might as well get started with it," I said. "In spite of your rather pessimistic outlook. The way you talk, you'd think the bombs were going to fall here tomorrow."

"They will," he told me. "Here, and everywhere."

"Very interesting." I shifted the gun to my left hand and took up the fountain pen. "But now, to business. Your name, please. Your real name."

"Kim Logan."

"Date of birth?"

"November 25th, 2903."

I raised the gun. "The right arm," I said. "Medial head of the triceps. It will hurt, too."

"November 25th, 2903," he repeated. "I came here last Sunday at 10 P.M., your time. By the same chronology I leave tonight at nine. It's a 169-hour cycle."

"What are you talking about?"

"My instrument is out there in the bay. The paintings and manuscripts are there. I intended to remain submerged until the departure moment tonight, but a man shot me."

"You feel feverish?" I asked. "Does your head hurt?"

"No. I told you it was no use explaining things. You won't believe me, any more than you believed me about the bombs."

"Let's stick to facts," I sug-



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gested. "You admit you stole the paintings. Why?"

"Because of the bombs, of course. The war is coming, the big one. Before tomorrow morning your planes will be over the Russian border and their planes will retaliate. That's only the beginning. It will go on for months, years. In the end—shambles. But the masterpieces I take will be saved."

"How?"

I TOLD you. Tonight, at nine, I return to my own place in the time-continuum." He raised his hand. "Don't tell me it's not possible. According to your present-day concepts of physics it would be. Even according to our science, only forward movement is demonstrable. When I suggested my project to the Institute they were skeptical. But they built the instrument according to my specifications, nevertheless. They permitted me to use the money from the Historical Foundation at Fort Knox. And I received an ironic blessing prior to my departure. I rather imagine my actual vanishment caused raised eyebrows. But that will be nothing compared to the reaction upon my return. My triumphant return, with a cargo of art masterpieces presumably destroyed nearly a thousand years in the past!"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "According to your story, you came here because you knew war was going to break out and you wanted to salvage some old masters from destruction. Is that it?"

"Precisely. It was a wild gamble, but I had the currency. I've studied the era as closely as any man can from the records available. I knew about the linguistic peculiarities of the age—you've had no trouble understanding me, have you? And I managed to work out a plan. Of course I haven't been entirely successful, but I've managed a great deal in less than a week's time. Perhaps I can return again—earlier—maybe a year or so beforehand, and procure more." His eyes grew bright. "Why not? We could build more instruments, come in a body. We could get everything we wanted, then."

I shook my head. "For the sake of argument, let's say for a minute that I believe you, which I don't. You've stolen some paintings, you say. You're taking them back to 29-something-or-other with you, tonight. You hope. Is that the story?"

"That's the truth."

"Very well. Now you suggest that you might repeat the experiment on a larger scale. Come back to a point a year before this in time and collect more masterpieces. Again, let's say you do it.



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What will happen to the paintings you took with you?"

"I don't follow you."

"Those paintings will be in your era, according to you. But a year ago they hung in various galleries. Will they be there when you come back? Surely they can't co-exist."

He smiled. "A pretty paradox. I'm beginning to like you, Dr. Rafferty."

"Well, don't let the feeling grow on you. It's not reciprocal, I assure you. Even if you were telling the truth, I can't admire your motives."

"What's wrong with my motives?" He stood up, ignoring the gun. "Isn't it a worthwhile goal—to save immortal treasures from the senseless destruction of a tribal war? The world deserves the preservation of its artistic heritage. I've risked my existence for the sake of bringing beauty to my own time—where it can be properly appreciated and enjoyed by minds no longer obsessed with the greed and cruelty I find here."

"Big words," I said. "But the fact remains. You *stole* those paintings."

"Stole? I saved them! I tell you, before the year is out they'd be utterly destroyed. Your galleries, your museums, your libraries—everything will go. Is it stealing to carry precious articles from a burning temple?" He leaned over me. "Is that a crime?"

"Why not stop the fire, instead?" I countered. "You know—from historical records, I suppose—that war breaks out tonight or tomorrow. Why not take advantage of your foresight and try to prevent it?"

I CAN'T. The records are sketchy, incomplete. Events are jumbled. I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed. Nothing is clear on that point."

"But couldn't you warn the authorities?"

"And change history? Change the actual sequence of events, rather? Impossible!"

"Aren't you changing them by taking the paintings?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" I stared into his eyes. "I don't see how. But then, the whole thing is impossible. I've wasted too much time in arguing."

"Time!" He looked at the wall clock. "Almost noon. I've got nine hours left. And so much to do. The instrument must be adjusted."

"Where is this precious mechanism of yours?"

"Out in the bay. Submerged, of course. I had that in mind when it was constructed. You can conceive of the hazards of at-



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tempting to move through time and alight on a solid surface; the face of the land alters. But the ocean is comparatively unchanging. I knew if I departed from a spot several miles offshore and arrived there, I'd eliminate most of the ordinary hazards. Besides, it offers a most excellent place of concealment. The principle, you see, is simple. By purely mechanical means I shall raise the instrument above the stratospheric level tonight and then intercalculate dimensionally when I am free of earth's orbit. The gantic-drive will be—"

No doubt about it. I didn't have to wait for the double-talk to know he was crazier than a codfish. A pity, too; he was really a handsome specimen.

"Sorry," I said. "Time's up. This is something I hate to do, but there's no other choice. No, don't move. I'm calling the police, and if you take one step I'll plug you."

"Stop! You mustn't call! I'll do anything, I'll even take you with me. That's it, I'll take you with me! Wouldn't you like to save your life? Wouldn't you like to escape?"

"No. Nobody escapes," I told him. "Especially not you. Now stand still, and no more funny business. I'm making that call."

He stopped. He stood still. I picked up the phone, with a sweet smile. He looked at me.

Something happened then.

There has been a great dispute about the clinical aspects of hypnotic therapy. I remember, in school, an attempt being made to hypnotize me. I was entirely immune. I concluded that a certain degree of cooperation or conditioned suggestibility is required of an individual in order to render him susceptible to hypnosis.

I was wrong.

I was wrong, because I couldn't move now. No lights, no mirrors, no voices, no suggestion. It was just that I couldn't move. I sat there holding the gun. I sat there and watched him walk out, locking the door behind him. I could see and I could feel. I could even hear him say "Good-by."

But I couldn't move. I could function, but only as a paralytic functions. I could, for example, watch the clock.

I watched the clock from 12 noon until almost seven. Several patients came during the afternoon, couldn't get in, and went away. I watched the clock until its face was lost in darkness. I sat there and endured hysteric rigidity until—providentially—the phone rang.

THAT broke it. But it broke me. I couldn't answer that phone. I merely slumped over on the desk, my muscles tightening with pain as the gun fell from my numb fingers. I lay there,



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gasping and sobbing, for a long time. I tried to sit up. It was agony. I tried to walk. My limbs rejected sensation. It took me an hour to gain control again. And even then, it was merely a partial control—a physical control. My thoughts were another matter.

Seven hours of thinking. Seven hours of *true or false?* Seven hours of accepting and rejecting the impossibly possible.

It was after eight before I was on my feet again, and then I didn't know what to do.

Call the police? Yes—but what could I tell them? I had to be sure, I had to know.

And what did I know? *He was out in the bay, and he'd leave at nine o'clock.* There was an instrument which would rise above the stratosphere—

I got in the car and drove. The dock was deserted. I took the road over to the Point, where there's a good view. I had the binoculars. The stars were out, but no moon. Even so, I could see pretty clearly.

There was a small yacht bobbing on the water, but no lights shone. Could that be it?

No sense taking chances. I remembered the radio report about the Coast Guard patrols.

So I did it. I drove back to town and stopped at a drugstore and made my call. Just reported the presence of the yacht. Perhaps they'd investigate, because there were no lights. Yes, I'd stay there and wait for them if they wished.

I didn't stay, of course. I went back to the Point. I went back there and trained my binoculars on the yacht. It was almost nine when I saw the cutter come along, moving up behind the yacht with deadly swiftness.

It was exactly nine when they flashed their lights—and caught, for an incredible instant, the gleaming reflection of the silver globe that rose from the water, rose straight up toward the sky.

Then came the explosion and I saw the shattering before I heard the echo of the report. They had portable anti-aircraft, something of the sort.

One moment the globe soared upward. The next moment there was nothing. They blew it to bits.

And they blew me to bits with it. Because if there *was* a globe, perhaps he was inside. With the masterpieces, ready to return to another time. The story was true, then, and if that was true, then—

I guess I fainted. My watch showed 10:30 when I came to and stood up. It was 11 before I made it to the Coast Guard Station and told my story.

Of course, nobody believed me. Even D. Halvorsen from emergency—he said he did, but he insisted on the injection and they took me here to the hospital.



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HEALTH RESEARCH
MOKELUMNE HILL 15, CALIFORNIA

It would have been too late, anyway. That globe did the trick. They must have contacted Washington immediately, with their story of a new secret Soviet weapon destroyed offshore. Coming on the heels of finding those bomb-laden ships, it was the final straw. Somebody gave orders and our planes took off. We've dropped bombs over there. And the alert has gone out, warning us of possible reprisals.

I keep thinking about the paradoxes of time-travel. This notion of carrying objects from the present to the future—and this other notion, about altering the past. I'd like to work out the theory, only there's no need. The old masters aren't going into the future. Any more than he, returning to our present, could stop the war.

What had he said? "I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed."

Well, this was the trivial incident. His visit. If I hadn't made that phone call, if the globe hadn't risen—but there's no use thinking about it any more. All that buzzing and droning noise outside and the sirens sounding, too. If I had any doubts about the truth of his claims, they're gone.

I wish I'd believed him. I wish the others would believe me now. But there just isn't any time. . . .

THE END



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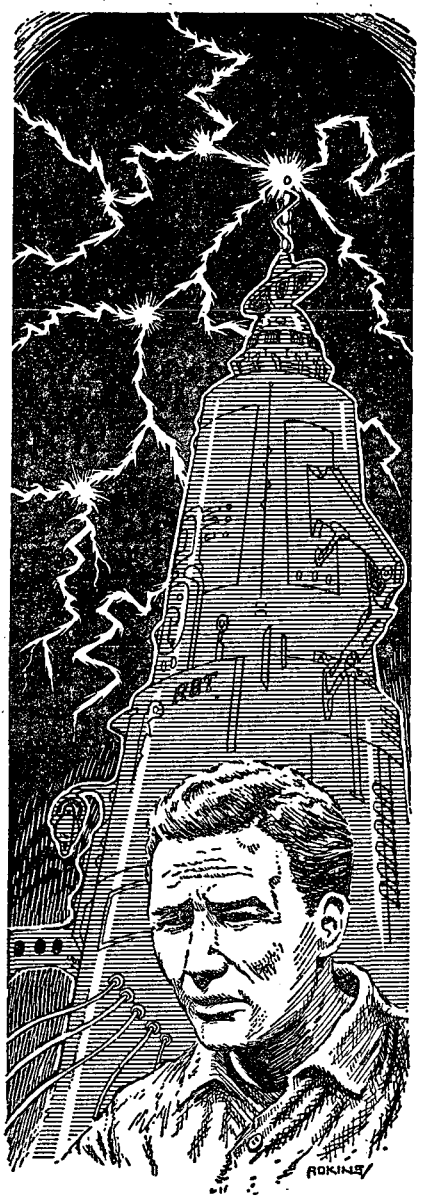
# RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

By JAMES A. COX

Illustrator ADKINS

*Years ago there was a tongue-twister that went like this: "Whether the weather be cold or whether the weather be hot, I'll weather the weather whatever the weather, whether I like it or not." Perhaps things were better for all of us in those days.*




AS YOU know, gentlemen, I came along only at the insistence of those two hulking Marines you see standing over there. I would have much preferred staying where I was—going down with my ship, you might say. But here I am, against my own inclinations. And since I am here, I may as well try to answer your questions. Not that



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it will make any difference now, of course. So, fire away.

What's that, Senator? I'm sorry, but you'll have to speak a little louder. The noise makes it difficult . . .

Oh. Well, I'm sorry if I sound as if I'm going to be a difficult witness. I don't really mean to be. It's just that I don't see the sense to all this. If I could undo what I've done, I suppose I would. But that's out of the question now, and I've said I'm sorry so many times in the past few months I . . .

But, all right. I'll do it your way. Although I must say that, under the circumstances, treating this as a formal inquiry seems little short of ridiculous.

My name is Alan Gerald Harrington. I am 43 years of age. By trade I am an electronics research engineer—presently unemployed.

Thank you, gentlemen, for the few chuckles I heard. It's nice to know there's some sense of humor left.

That's not true, Senator. I'm not being sarcastic, and I'm not being smart-alecky. I *know* this isn't a laughing matter. But does that mean that nobody can laugh at anything any more? Do we have to walk around tripping over our chins?

ALL RIGHT, Senator, you win. I'm a screwball, I'm a ghoul, I'm a mad fiend who eats little children. I did it on purpose and I should be locked up. So lock me up. Put me in the gas chamber. I didn't ask to come here to defend myself. I didn't want to come at all. Don't you think, Senator, that my conscience might be bothering me just a little?

All right, Mr. President. I'm sorry for the outburst. Yes, I'll go on. You want me to go all the way back to the beginning? Even though a lot of it is fairly common knowledge?

*Ha ha.* That's true, Mr. President, we aren't likely to be going anywhere in a hurry. *Ha ha.* I noticed that even the Senator laughed that time.

Well, as near as I can figure out, it started when they threw me out of the patent office. They laughed in my face when I showed them the plans and my model and explained what they would be able to do. They showed me the door and practically told me never to darken it again.

I had expected doubt . . . disbelief . . . but I certainly didn't expect to be ridiculed and treated as if I were some idiot who should be tossed in a cage. I was good and angry, and I vowed that I'd show them. So I went back to my place in Jersey—I had a nice little farmhouse there near the Palisades with a barn that was just the thing for a



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laboratory, and no snoopy neighbors around. I kept RBT in the hayloft there—RBT, as you all know, is the name I gave the pilot model of my Meteorological Management System. But what you don't know is that RBT was not, despite the learned guesses of the newspaper science experts, an abbreviation for the word "robot" or any other such wild nonsense. Very simply, the letters were the initials of Robert Bailey Thomas, whom I admire very much, and in whose honor I named the machine.

OH, come now, Admiral! You mean you really don't know who Robert Bailey Thomas was? I'm amazed. No offense, of course, but I thought that was common knowledge. Well, I'll tell you, then. Among other accomplishments, Robert Bailey Thomas was one of the most prolific contributors to the field of early American letters, a molder of the reading habits of whole generations of our people. In addition, he was also the true father of our weather bureau, sire of that long line of charlatans masquerading as professionals in the pseudo-science of weather forecasting. In short he was the founder and publisher of The Old Farmers' Almanac . . .

You see, Senator, I liked my little joke even in those, for me, very serious days.

I beg your pardon, Mr. President? I'm sorry, but I didn't hear you. Oh, well, I didn't think you'd want me to go back that far in the personal side of it. Yes, I see what you mean, and I guess it would be interesting to someone who never experienced it.

Well, this will probably shock some of you, and I suppose it will serve to convince the senator that I really am a screwball, as he so delicately puts it. But the truth is, I felt like God. Imagine to yourselves what it was like. For the first time you sit before the massed dials of an electronic masterpiece you have created, knowing that in a matter of minutes—seconds—you are going to have the combined forces of the elements under your control. Wouldn't you feel like God, too?

You set the switches, turn on the current. Up, up and up into the troposphere fly your invisible hands. You grasp the winds by the throat and subdue them. You blot out the face of the sun with clouds, then squeeze the life-blood out of them, now gently, now harshly. You flick lightning out of the sky like a cigarette butt. The stars in the palm of your hand, blizzards and hurricanes and bone-searing heat at your beck and call, at the snap of your fingers on the instrument panel . . .



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Gentlemen, I confess to you that for one whirling, giddy moment I actually believed I *was* God.

THE moment of madness didn't last, of course. No matter what some of you may think, I am first of all a scientist, and therefore a reasonably sensible man. Besides, I had no trouble remembering the fourteen years I had labored and sweated in clincal mid-wifery over the birth of this brainchild. And in a grinding fashion hardly befitting a divinity, I might add.

So there I was. RBT was a success—as resounding a success as I had imagined in my wildest dreams. With the flip of a switch I could control the weather—absolutely control it, every ray of sunlight, every drop of rain, every waft of wind—over an area roughly a hundred miles in diameter. And RBT was only an experimental model—a pilot!

Can you imagine, gentlemen, the supreme exhilaration I felt? You are all men of stature and accomplishment, men who, by your deeds, have proven yourselves leaders, men of vision, men with the mark of history on them. Can you deny that the desire to be remembered by future generations as more than a statistic has played an important part in molding the dreams and decisions that made you what you are? Admitting that, can you imagine the place reserved in posterity for the man who eradicated drought and dust bowls? Who made the deserts bloom? Who brought flowers to the Poles and cool, refreshing zephyrs to the Tropics?

Can you imagine, gentlemen, fields bursting with crops because they've received just the right amount of rain and sun, at just the right time—and all year round, if need be? Can you imagine an Eastern Seaboard and Gulf Coast no longer lashed by hurricanes, an India freed of the devastation of monsoon-driven storms and floods, a world in which tornados didn't exist and blizzards never occurred to leave ruin and snow-choked traffic in their wake? Let's bring it down to cases. Can you imagine a world in which your front lawn never burned brown and a vacation weekend was never ruined by rain?

THIS is the world I had at my fingertips, gentlemen. This was my gift to posterity. And what did the enlightened clerks in your patent office make of it? They belched martini fumes in my face, spilled a cup of coffee on plans that represented the painstaking labor of years, and flicked cigar ashes on a scale model of the most important in-



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vention the world has ever known.

Oh, I tell you, gentlemen, if I had known the home addresses of those particular scoundrels I would have made things hot for them. Or cold.

As it was, I returned to my laboratory determined to rent a truck and move RBT to within range of Washington and put on a show that would make the world sit up and take notice. But I am not a vindictive man, and my conscience wouldn't let me inflict suffering on innocent people for the insults and rebuffs of a few pompous fools. Deciding on a much simpler, but still effective plan. I quickly made the necessary adjustments to RBT's switch panel, lined up the scanners on the New York City metropolitan area, set the controls on automatic and sat back to watch the fun.

You'll remember the circumstances, I'm sure. The first day there was no reaction worthy of notice. People marked it off as a freak in the weather. But when it happened again the second and third days, the howl that went up blasted the weather bureau right off the seat of its collective complacent britches. It was beautiful. At 6:55 in the morning the sky began to cloud up. Exactly five minutes later, precisely at 7:00, the rain suddenly started pelting down, lasting until 9:00, when the clouds broke up and the day turned exquisite. But at 11:55 the clouds came back and it rained cats and dogs again between noon and 2:00. And the same thing happened again in the evening between 4:55 and 7:00, and 9:55 and midnight.

You'll have to admit that the pattern was cleverly designed to cause maximum discomfort. Morning and evening rush hours, lunchtime, show break—nobody stayed dry! Let me tell you, gentlemen, it was a joke of heroic proportions!

What's that, Senator? You were in New York at the time? Oh, isn't that a shame. No . . . no, I certainly don't expect you to see the humor in it. Well, of course I'm sorry if I inconvenienced you *that* much. But I hope you can see my side of it a little, too.

*Tush, tush,* Senator! If that's your attitude, I guess we'd better drop the whole matter.

TO GET on, then. By the end of a week of it, half the citizens of the States of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut were up in arms. Weather forecasters in a dozen cities were hanged in effigy. Delicatessens were overwhelmed with delivery lunch orders. Stores were buying umbrellas and raincoats back



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from commuters. The newspapers and their experts went wild with front page stories and banner headlines and the most drivelish theories you ever heard.

When the second week started the same way, certain politicians began demanding a Congressional investigation, and an unimpeachable source in the State Department leaked to several prominent columnists that the Russians were behind it all. The unruly mobs that had taken to stoning the Central Park weather station now turned their attention on the Russian Consulate, and were prevented from wrecking it only by the quick action of the New York National Guard. The Russians denied everything, of course, but in such a way that everybody became convinced they really were responsible. Then they claimed that the same thing had been going on for several months in Lower Turkestan, or some place unpronounceable that sounded like that, blamed it all on us and tried to get the U.N. Security Council to brand us as aggressors.

Our own lunatic fringe had a hey-day, too, one extreme seeing men from Mars in every raindrop, the other crawling into caves to await the end of the world. And of course the atom bomb was damned in every bar in the city.

Well, things were getting a little sticky, and I was beginning to wonder if maybe I'd better let up for a while, when suddenly a long procession of big black cars and motorcycle cops came bouncing and screeching down the dirt road that leads to my farm. They pulled in like hot-rodders, digging up the front lawn better than a plow could do the job, and out leaped what looked like half of official Washington, all of them waving their arms as they ran into the barn where I was standing, and shouting, "Turn it off, Harrington! You'll get your patent. Turn it off!"

BELIEVE me, I was as glad they found me as they were. I was beginning to think I had forgotten to leave my address with the bunch of oafs from the Patent Office. But I didn't let on.

Well, gentlemen—and especially you, Mr. President—you all know what happened next as well as I do. I got the patent on my RBT, and immediately turned it over to the government. I don't imagine this is the place or the time to go over all the details, but I do want to say that the government treated me very handsomely, in addition to making me head of the research section of the new Meteorological Management Department.



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If you remember, there was a lot of talk at the time in the Pentagon and elsewhere about keeping news of the invention secret until a whole string of RBTs could be erected, blanketing the country. But of course that was impossible. Too many people knew about it already. So word got out, and what happened then when the newspapers, magazines and radio and television boys got hold of it . . .

Well, if nobody here objects, I'd just as soon skip all that. I'm likely to get a little violent when the subject of interviews and interviewers comes up.

Thank you. So there we were, at what in some ways was the real beginning of the mess we're in. I don't especially relish saying I told you so, but if you'll remember, I was against building a nation-wide network of RBTs right from the start. I guess that was my first big mistake—relinquishing all control over how the invention was to be used. I'm not blaming the entire government structure, mind you, because I know now that a number of people agreed with me. But the big-picture boys were allowed their head, and you all know what the results are likely to be when that happens.

I had a nice, sensible program mapped out, one that wouldn't have cost the government a thousandth of what was finally spent. If that program had been implemented, we would have had a workable system, and, to coin a phrase, gentlemen, we probably wouldn't be in the boat we're in now.

My plan was simply to manufacture a dozen or so RBTs and mount them in special tractor-trailer units. These units we could have located strategically about the country, ready to be sent into troubled areas whenever emergency conditions arose. This would have given us quick protection, at minimum cost, and would have allowed us time and money to develop more sophisticated versions of RBT with a much wider range.

Give me that again, General? Why, certainly. Of course I realized what the planning groups were trying to accomplish. I mentioned a number of the possible benefits earlier, didn't I? And if I'm not mistaken, I did conceive and create the machine that made those benefits possible. But I maintained then, and I still do, that everybody else seemed to misunderstand the primary purpose of RBT, which was for emergency control. *Emergency.* That means it was to be brought into play when abnormal weather conditions threatened the lives and welfare of the country. It was never meant to be used the way the big-picture boys set it up.



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But they had their way, of course. And the results you see now.

WHAT's that, Mr. Secretary? How can I blame it all on the higher echelons of the Meteorological Management Department? Well, I should think the answer to that would be obvious, but since it apparently isn't, I'll try to refresh your memory somewhat.

Do you remember how it was in the beginning? How, even before the system of stations was completed, the local weather bureaus were messing around with the weather every day? Now, that was bureaucracy for you. Oh, it wasn't so bad at first, I'll admit. It was a novelty, and the public had been softened up for it by one of the most fantastic publicity snow jobs in history. The people thought it was a lark. And everybody and his brother was either running or sinking his money in the rain-or-shine lotteries that sprang up like crabgrass all over the country. I won fifty bucks myself, once, but I had to buy my ticket under an assumed name, and had a devil of a time collecting when the operators of the game discovered who I was.

That was all innocent enough, but do you remember what happened then, when the bookies and big-time gamblers moved in? Remember the scandals, and the investigations that followed? The bribery, the fortunes made and lost, the broken reputations and lives? The honest weathermen beaten, and in at least two cases murdered, because they wouldn't go along with the gamblers? And do you remember the other honest weathermen, the ones who cracked up because, no matter what weather they chose to create, they were bound to favor one gambling group and therefore become suspect?

It was Prohibition and the Roaring Twenties all over again until that little slip of a gal took over the job in the Memphis office. She had imagination and spunk, that one. Remember how she beat the bookies and the bully boys? She gave 'em a little bit of everything. Every day down in Alabama the sun shone, it rained, the wind blew from every quarter, it snowed, it hailed, it got hot, it got cold, it got foggy. She even managed to have everything happen at the same time. She was a musician, that girl, when she sat down before the RBT.

SO every other weatherman and RBT operator took his cue from Miss Mobile, and what did we have then? Chaos, complete and utter. Remember what it was like? You bet your grandmother's sweet preserves you do.



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THAT was when Congress stepped in with a bill specifying each day's weather by law. Let's see if I remember it right. Sunny and warm enough for swimming on weekends, but not too warm—that was an obvious one. Heavy, soaking rain on Mondays. Remember the blast that went up from the nation's housewives when they heard that? But it got railroaded through anyhow when the United Women's Clubs of America threw their weight—no, Senator, I'm not cracking jokes again—threw their weight behind it, basing their reasoning on the pretty premise that a good heavy rain on Monday would wash away the debris left over from the weekend, and thereby serve to help beautify the face of the country. Even if its underwear *was* dirty, I might add.

I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the gas and electric dryer manufacturers had quite a lobby working on that one, too. Wasn't it just after the bill became law that they raised their prices?

Anyhow, Monday was followed by balmy weather on Tuesday and Wednesday, then another day of drenching rains on Thursdays, then nice weather on Friday for all the hard-working executive types who like to get a head start on the weekend.

Well, you all know how long that noble experiment lasted, what with all the lobbies and pressure groups screaming their heads off. I don't want to go into a long harangue about regimentation, but don't you think it's about time governments realized that the people can and will take just so much of it?

So they rescinded that bill. And what did they come up with? Something worse. You'd think they'd have learned their lesson. But no, once they start regulating they just can't seem to stop. And so they came up with that last piece of nightmare legislation, ordering that every day be beautiful and bright, and that a gentle rain falleth from heaven between midnight and dawn every morning. That was the quality of our legislators' mercy, and the extent of their understanding of human character. My apologies to all the senators and congressmen gathered here. But you must admit, gentlemen, that it didn't work out well, even if it did sound good on the silver tongues of its backers.

I HAVE a confession to make now, but first I'd like to tell you a little story. It's a personal story, but it relates to what I'm going to say later, so please bear with me. As the President said earlier, we're not about to go running off anywhere anyhow.



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One morning about five months after the "Sunny Days" program was put into effect, I walked into the grill room in my hotel where I usually had breakfast, perched myself on a stool at the counter and called out to the waitress, "Bacon and eggs, please, sunnyside-up."

The waitress, a chunky, tough-looking, red-headed wench, made no sign that she had heard me, but I assumed, since I had been eating the same breakfast there for months, that the order had become automatic. While I waited I noticed that the blinds on the windows were closed, so I reached over and opened them. The early morning sun, glistening on the pavement outside that was still damp from the night's rain, bounced into the room.

Suddenly a freckled hand with peeling silver polish on the nails reached past me and snapped the blinds shut again. I turned to look, and saw the red-haired waitress standing straddle-legged before me, her hands on her broad hips, "We *like* them blinds closed," she said loudly. "And we don't serve no sunny-side-up eggs here no more, either, Perfessor."

As you can imagine, I was startled. "Well, for goodness' sake, why not?" I asked.

She laughed raucously, and to my dismay I heard the other early morning diners join in.

The waitress turned to them. "Get him," she said, with an exaggerated motion of her thumb over her shoulder in my direction. "Sunnyside-up eggs he wants yet! Ain't that a hot one? And he wants to know why not!"

She turned back to me. "*You* oughta know why not better'n anybody, Perfessor," she sneered.

I hadn't the slighest idea why I shouldn't ask for sunnyside-up eggs. I had them every morning. But I could hear the titters of cold laughter in the room as the other diners enjoyed my discomfort, and I'm afraid I became more embarrassed than annoyed.

"Poached?" I stammered.

"Hah! Now it's poached he wants," the waitress snorted, and leaned over the counter to waggle a plump finger under my nose. "No, Perfessor. No poached, neither. You want eggs, you'll take 'em scrambled."

NOW, normally I'm a comparatively mild-mannered man. Public scenes make me a little sick, especially when I'm involved. But I do not like scrambled eggs. Not at all.

I slid off the stool, trembling with what I hoped was only indignation. "Then I'll take my business elsewhere," I said, as frigidly as I could, but with a



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voice that cracked ridiculously like a schoolboy's.

"Go ahead, Perfessor," the waitress shouted after me. "Take it somewhere else. But there ain't nobody in this town is gonna serve you eggs sunnyside-up. Not you. You'll take 'em scrambled and like 'em!"

I slammed the door behind me with a fine show of spirit, but the sound of mocking laughter followed me down the street in the brilliant sunlight.

That's all there was to it. Ridiculous story, isn't it? All that to-do about a couple of eggs. I wracked my brain trying to figure it out. It just didn't make sense.

And then all of a sudden it dawned on me, gentlemen, the simple yet sinister meaning of the sunnyside-up egg episode. Ah, I see understanding on some of your faces. But don't forget—you have the benefit of viewing the incident through the clearer prism of hindsight.

So, now to my confession. Do you remember that gorgeous, sunny afternoon last July when the nation and the world were suddenly stunned by the news that it had started raining in Washington? Then in New York? Then in California, Texas, Maine, Iowa, Florida and so on until the whole country, from border to border, even up to Alaska and out to Hawaii, was basking in it? Well, gentlemen, it really wasn't an attempt at sabotage by Russian agents, as the newspapers and just about everybody else conjectured.

Yes, Mr. President, you've guessed correctly. That was the same day as the egg affair.

HOW did I do it? Well, I had been working on a master control system for the entire RBT network, and it was just about finished. The egg business told me that a lot of people would probably welcome the patter of little raindrops, and I suddenly realized that I was just about up to here with beautiful, sunny afternoons myself. So I just plugged her in and let her rip. Worked fine, too, except for time-sync. But I didn't bother straightening it out then. I just walked outside with my clothes on, enjoying the weather.

What's that, Senator? You say I ruined the lawn party your wife was giving for the wife of the Monrovian ambassador? Well, say, I certainly do want to apologize. I had no idea . . .

Well, yes, Senator, I realized I was breaking the law of the land. Yes, yes again, I do consider the law sacred—to some extent, at least. But I don't put it above the welfare of my country.

What I'm referring to, Senator, were those amazing and well-



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documented FBI reports—reports which I'm sure you and your committee were privy to—that told of several widespread plots to destroy the RBT system, and how, by fantastic coincidence, they were dissipated by the fact of rain falling *on the very day they were to be put into effect.* And these were not plots by foreign agents. The plotters were ordinary American citizens, with no subversive background, who didn't think the government had the right to dictate what God's weather was to be. And who were just plain fed up with sunshine.

I don't claim that I foresaw these plots, gentlemen, and sent the rain to forestall them. It was sheer luck, backed by the grace of God. But I *had* sensed the mood of the people correctly, and proof that what I did would have been good even if there had been no plots was apparent in the reaction of the public. Did they bombard the weather bureaus with complaints when their lovely sunny day was ruined by rain? They did not! They ran out into the storm and roared their approval. All across the country. There was even a story prevalent at the time that an impromptu conga line which started at the corner of Hollywood and Vine extended all the way to Frisco and stopped traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge.

YES, Senator. I'm well aware that the story is considered apocryphal.

So, gentlemen, that's the background. All that I've told you should explain why, later, I did what I did. If you will remember, I pleaded with you—all of you—all of Washington—anyone who would listen—to take off the controls and use RBT as it was meant to be used. But no one would pay any attention to me. You all said it was for the good of the country, and the people would become adjusted. *Adjusted.* That's a popular, hopeful word. After a few more months of sun, sun and more sun, the people were adjusting so well they were ready to hang us all—me first.

You want to know if I was frightened, Mr. President? I don't want to appear any more presumptuous than you already consider me, but weren't you frightened when you heard about it? Weren't you all?

But even more than fright, I happened to be on the side of the people. After all, I invented the machine, and therefore I couldn't help but feel that I bore a major share of the responsibility. That's why I never let anyone know that I had perfected the master control system. I had something of a premonition of what was to come, and figured I might have to use it some day.



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*Premonition*, General. I said I had something of a premontion that I'd need the master control some day. Yes. I'm sorry, but I guess my voice is getting tired after talking for so long, and it *is* difficult to hear over the noise of the wind and the ventilators.

Well, that's just about the story, gentlemen. When I heard the news on Christmas Eve that the government had turned down that monster petition for snow, and that angry mobs were storming the RBT stations all over the country, I knew I'd have to do something fast. So I plugged in the control, intending to give the people their white Christmas.

But in my haste, I threw the switch in reverse. I recognized the error immediately, but still too late. The damage was done—the entire RBT system blew up. I've said I was sorry, but I don't think anyone can find fault with my motives. It was just a simple stupid mistake, and I don't think any man alive could have predicted that the weather would go stark raving wild when the controls were broken off.

Well, yes, Congressman, I had an idea there'd be *some* reaction. But how could I know it would last-going on forty days? Or that it would get so warm the glaciers and ice caps would . . . ?

Yes, Mr. Secretary, we tried that. The Navy salvaged my pilot RBT. It's set up now, down in the hangar deck. But it's not strong enough to cope with this.

I beg your pardon, Mr. President? Well . . . that's a good question. I don't know that there's anything we *can* do. I guess we'll just have to do what Noah did—float around this way and wait for the waters to subside.

**THE END**


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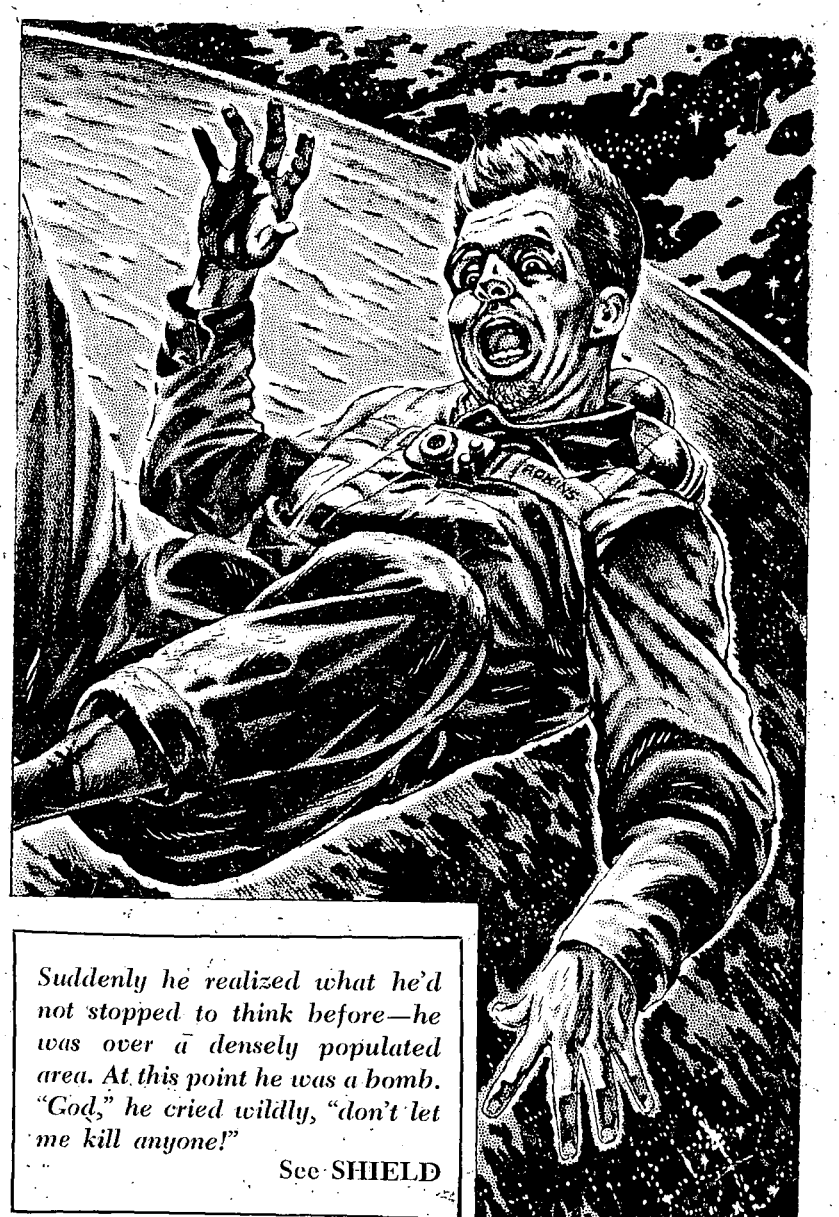

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